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# Beyond Biblical Theology

Sacralized Culturalism in Heikki Räisänen's Hermeneutics

*By*

Timo Eskola



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In the memory of Martin Hengel



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## FOREWORD

This study has a long history. Over the years I have written several analyses on biblical interpretation. In many of these writings, I have referred to professor Heikki Räisänen and at times focusing on his ideas not the least because, for three decades, he served as a New Testament professor at the University of Helsinki. In Finland, he has been generating scholarly discussion all my adult lifetime.

On the one hand, one can see this monograph as an homage to a teacher and his long career. On the other hand, the book itself is not solely about Räisänen. It can also be read as an analysis of the development of biblical interpretation during the last forty years in the West. Professor Räisänen is just one scholar, albeit an exemplary one, among many who clearly present thought-provoking statements. He is a versatile and prolific writer whose work can easily be made the subject of investigation. His work, thus, becomes a window through which the larger development of Protestant biblical hermeneutics can be assessed. This analysis takes up this task and places him in context. In many chapters, more pages are dedicated to contemporary scholars and different currents than to Räisänen and his writings. While I do have a specific point of view, the aim is to understand how biblical interpretation has grown in the area of New Testament scholarship.

One could also ask whether this book has been written under the influence of professor Räisänen himself. The context is self-evident but my personal commitments are elsewhere. As a New Testament scholar, I have always belonged to the new Tübingen school, studying and writing under the extraordinary professor, the late Martin Hengel, as well as the distinguished professor Peter Stuhlmacher at the same university. The present investigation aims at a similar critical and open academic discussion with Räisänen's work that for instance Peter Balla, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Todd Penner have conducted in recent years.

Furthermore, I want to thank professor Räisänen's pupils, my colleagues at the University of Helsinki, for the long discussions we have had over the years. Many of the ideas brought up in these discussions have undoubtedly found their way into this monograph in one form or another. Scientific research is a process, and I have profited much from our interaction.

I also want to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Sydney Palmer, my dependable friend, once more for highly professional work with the language revision. Her solicitous attitude toward a Finn attempting to express himself in English is probably the only reason why it is possible to propose this book for publication.

I further want to thank the Theological Institute of Finland and its general secretary, Rev. Henrik Perret, for making this investigation possible. It really has been a privilege to work as a New Testament scholar at the Institute for two decades. My thanks will, I hope, also reach our secretary Kirsi Sell as well as the staff of the library. Their altruistic work is often left in the shadows but no monograph could ever be written without the help of such committed friends.

Finally, I wish to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Prof. Paul N. Anderson for the kind acceptance of my study for publication in this distinguished series, as well as to the editorial staff at Brill for their professional assistance in preparing the manuscript for publication.

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## INTRODUCTION

### READING RÄISÄNEN'S BIBLICAL CRITICISM IN CONTEXT

Taking one scholar as an exemplary author for investigating the development of biblical interpretation through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries up till the twenty-first century might be a daring enterprise were it not true that, in a sense, every scholar is a link between the past and the future. In this respect the Finnish professor emeritus Heikki Räisänen has a special position because his works reflect the ideas both of the earliest possible critical scholars and some of the most recent new voices contributing to biblical criticism.

Hermeneutics is a complex and much-discussed subject and, therefore, it is necessary to devote some thoughts on its definitions before moving on to the actual object of the present investigation. This will not be a work treating Räisänen's biographical issues, nor will it offer a complete presentation of his bibliography. Instead, the focus shall be on his views on revelation and inspiration. Hermeneutical theories wish to explain the genesis of theology, possible dynamics behind different expressions and the relation between individual statements. Therefore, the present work shall not try to investigate Räisänen's every writing in the area of biblical criticism. Instead, it will be weighted towards the context in which he is writing.

This does not mean that the present analysis will ignore Räisänen's views on historical investigation, though. Quite the contrary, these issues will be of great importance for his views on interpretation. As a young scholar, Räisänen was one of the first authors to adopt and use German historical-critical methods (form criticism and redaction criticism) in their full force in Finland. Already his dissertation on Mary, *Die Mutter Jesu im Neuen Testament* (1969), expresses these efforts. After his installation as the professor in New Testament studies at the relatively young age of 33, many other works were to follow, such as a study on the messianic secret in Mark, *Das Messiasgeheimnis im Markusevangelium: ein redaktionskritischer Versuch* (1976). Then, four decades later, his large monograph on New Testament ideas was published shortly after his retirement—reflecting the scholarly world of the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I do not intend to list Räisänen's every book in this study, but a short reference to his early works shows where he started his career. All significant monographs will be

In Räisänen's career there is an interesting phase that is not very well known outside Finland. Soon after writing his dissertation he was encouraged to apply for a professor's chair in the department of Science of Religion. For this purpose, Räisänen turned to Quran studies. His two monographs on ideas in the Quran, *Das koranische Jesusbild* (1971) and *The Idea of Divine Hardening* (1972) were written according to the critical methods applied also in New Testament studies, but the main approach was that of a science of religion. Räisänen has later said that these studies were crucial for the development of his hermeneutical thinking. A new career in the science of religion was not realized, though, and somewhat later Räisänen had the opportunity to apply for the chair of New Testament, which he then held for three decades (1975–2006).<sup>2</sup>

The special contribution of the present study, regarding the investigation of Räisänen's writings and theology, is in the treatment of his Finnish publications. There is important material that has never been translated into English or any other language. The most important of these is his early article "Raamatun auktoriteetista" ["On the Authority of the Bible"] from 1972.<sup>3</sup> Written at the time when Räisänen's Quran studies were also published, this article presents the basic foundation on which his hermeneutics was built. We could mention another article elaborating his early views that focus on the relationship between the science of religion and New Testament studies, as well as a quite practical article where similar historical-critical methods are applied both to the interpretation of the Quran and the New Testament.<sup>4</sup>

As far as Räisänen's other works are considered, he is famous especially for his *Paul and the Law* (1986), which, belonging to the Sandersian tradition of the "New Perspective on Paul," became a focus of a rather intense discussion during the 1990s. Right after the publication of the work on Paul, Räisänen started working on Finnish articles that later came to form the essential corpus of the *Beyond New Testament Theology* (1990).

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mentioned in the bibliography later, but it will not attempt to be exhaustive. More complete bibliographies are easily available elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> Räisänen tells about this phase in his life also in his farewell lecture before his retirement, published in Räisänen, *Vartija* 3 (2006) 85–86. A short reference to this phase can be found also in Penner, *Moving Beyond*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Räisänen's article *Authority* will be presented especially in 2.2. The article discussing the science of religion and biblical studies is in Räisänen, *TAik* 102 (1997) 119–125. For the comparison between the Quran and the Bible, see Räisänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 34–46.

<sup>4</sup> Räisänen has also translated several articles into English but these texts can be found only in Finnish.

This monograph, finally, gave him the opportunity to work on the Wre-dean hypothesis, replacing traditional New Testament theology with a history-of-religion project. Some of the main elaborations on the issue have later been published in English in Räisänen's *Challenges to Biblical Interpretation: Collected Essays 1991–2001* (2001).<sup>5</sup> All these writings, however, have been but a prolegomena for a final work providing a complete science of religion picture about the formation of early Christian thought. When *The Rise of Christian Beliefs* was finally published in 2010, after more than two decades of research, Räisänen's statement was completed.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding Räisänen's interpretation theory, the main task of the present study is to explore and define the nature of his hermeneutical theory. In practice, this means that one needs to investigate in what way and to what degree his studies on the Quran have influenced his hermeneutics of experience and interpretation. As the basic principles of his theory were developed already in his early writings and referred to in the monographs dealing with Quran studies, this question is of the utmost importance when attempting to understand how his interpretation theory works. Furthermore, this will be one of the first analyses written on his *magnum opus* that summarizes the ideas of his life-long investigations. As Räisänen himself says in his Finnish writings, his early theory still directs his ideas in *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*. This primary task of this study is then accompanied by the desire to read Räisänen's works in a broader context. In each decade he both comments on and makes good use of the ideas of several other scholars working in the field. This is how a contextual reading simultaneously provides a window to biblical scholarship over the past four decades. Räisänen's work reflects the whole development of Western biblical criticism in many respects.

During his long career as a New Testament professor Räisänen has moved from Reimarus to Bultmann, and from Bultmann to Berger and

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<sup>5</sup> Some scholars hold Räisänen's *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma* (1997) as a sequel to the *Beyond*, and its articles do indeed treat many history-of-religion issues. Furthermore, Räisänen's *Challenges* was in fact preceded by a German book *Neutestamentliche Theologie? Eine religionswissenschaftliche Alternative* (2000). The original material for the book, as Räisänen says in the preface, derive from 1992, but the discussions in the monograph have been updated before finally being publishing. In this book he presents several useful definitions that will be used in this analysis.

<sup>6</sup> In this study the first editions of Räisänen's books are used, unless otherwise indicated. The most important revised editions to be noted are *Paul and the Law*, 2nd Edition, especially for its "Preface to second edition" discussing all relevant comments that other scholars have made on the first edition, and the completely revised second edition of *Beyond New Testament Theology*.

Luckmann. There are features in his works that can easily be identified as ideas present already in Reimarus' *Fragments* published by G.E. Lessing towards the end of the eighteenth century. He has learned from German rationalism but he has undoubtedly also moved forward, reading authors from Strauss and Wrede to Käsemann and Lohse. Räsänen's relation to Bultmann, to pick one example, is complex and will require a chapter of its own in the analysis. Räsänen never fully aligned himself with Bultmann, though. It is quite interesting to assess his relation to structuralism, poststructuralism and even the death-of-God theology that often builds on the latter.<sup>7</sup>

What has turned out to be especially important in this study is Räsänen's adherence to Peter Berger and the Weberian tradition of the sociological interpretation of religion. An entire chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of this hermeneutical current. Sociological theory can be held to be a major factor in Räsänen's interpretation theory, and it has significance also more widely in historical-critical hermeneutics. Furthermore, Räsänen is very postmodern in claiming a completely new theological hermeneutics in the "global village" we now live in. His recent addresses on theological issues direct us towards contemporary readings. This, however, is not necessarily an easy way to proceed. Some recent commentators accuse him of staying in the modern and neglecting all the important ethical issues of the postmodern agenda. This, of course, will finally put his *Rise* to the test, the features of which need to be assessed towards the end of the present investigation.<sup>8</sup>

It should be noted, however, that hermeneutics, for Räsänen, does not necessarily mean the same thing as for many of the scholars who have written particularly on hermeneutical theory.<sup>9</sup> He speaks often of interpretation but he does not define the term in any precise way. In his writings his conception oscillates between different alternatives: approach, interpretation or application. Räsänen, for instance, in some cases calls different general views of the Bible interpretations of the Bible. He may

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<sup>7</sup> All relevant literature will be introduced later in the passages where they are treated. See especially 4.3.

<sup>8</sup> See especially Laffey, *Moving Beyond*, 54. Cf. Räsänen's ideas in the collection *Global Village*. Räsänen also comments on the discussion that the latter book provoked, and these texts can be found in the collection *Moving Beyond*.

<sup>9</sup> One could refer for instance to Thiselton's simple definition: "Hermeneutics explores how we read, understand, and handle texts, especially those written in another time or in a context of life different from our own." Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 1. Here hermeneutics means the entire epistemological process when we treat ancient texts.



also say that, in historical study, each book of the Bible is "interpreted" with the help of contemporary sources. One might get the impression that interpretation belongs to the historical method itself.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes he states, however, that historical explanation must be separated from later interpretations concerning the texts' meaning to us today. In this case interpretation means application.<sup>11</sup> Some of the difficulties concerning terminology derive from the Finnish language. Räisänen often uses the word "näkemys" which is hard to translate: view/opinion/idea/conception. Interpretation now means what in German would be *Anschauung/Auffassung/Ansicht*. The main idea in these semantic groups is in the reader-response effect: Räisänen means the view that the reader has on the Bible.<sup>12</sup>

For Räisänen, there are three main approaches that direct the interpretation of the Bible in general. This trichotomy is based on his understanding of historical study. He claims that the theory of interpretation changes according to the changes concerning the view on the Bible in general. (1) The first phase is conservative and fundamentalist, insisting on verbal inspiration. (2) The second phase Räisänen calls salvation historical interpretation. He says that scholars who suggest this do acknowledge some of the historical problems that scientific research encounters, but these are solved by accepting the defects and concentrating on "the main issues" of theology. (3) The third alternative and also the last historical phase is the non-literal reading that is based solely on scientific or historical investigation of the Bible. This is Räisänen's own approach to New Testament texts. He says that this reading sees the New Testament as a historical text the interpretation of which must be conducted in terms of the historical-critical investigation of the Bible.<sup>13</sup>

According to Räisänen, these phases are historical phases also because scholars have gradually matured and departed from the ideas of verbal inspiration. Salvation historical interpretation no longer accepts a direct

<sup>10</sup> For instance in Räisänen, *Raamattutieto*, 179.

<sup>11</sup> In his *Raamattunäkemystä etsimässä* Räisänen says that historical investigation of the Bible "in no way needs to answer" the question about what the Bible means for us "here and now." Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemystä etsimässä*, 147.

<sup>12</sup> The basic problem behind this speculation concerns Räisänen's view of inductivist study. This issue will be dealt with in 2.1.

<sup>13</sup> Räisänen sometimes speaks of two dichotomies, and sometimes of a trichotomy. The main dichotomy is between the literal reading and the historical approach. The latter, in turn, is divided in two: the salvation historical or the non-literary (existentialist) reading. Räisänen, *Raamattutieto*, 178–185; *Miten ymmärrän*, 120–121. The triadic pattern can be found in Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemystä etsimässä*, 144–148. For a further analysis on these, see 2.1.

dogmatic reading of the New Testament. Historical investigation then changes the whole setting, and its complete acceptance is considered the summit of the process. There is an evolutionary pattern behind Räsänen's thinking, and this is one of the interesting features in his hermeneutics that will be investigated in the present study.<sup>14</sup>

This is not a book merely on Räsänen, though. Not solely. Instead, the aim of the study is to investigate the nature of Räsänen's hermeneutics in the light of a much wider perspective on the development of biblical research. What we hope to do here is to present new insights on the understanding of the whole course of scientific biblical criticism and especially biblical interpretation, also called scriptural hermeneutics. Many chapters will contain broad analyses, including scholars other than Räsänen as well.

Therefore, the investigation starts with Reimarus and his predecessors. A new approach will be suggested by claiming that medieval Quran criticism is the actual origin of Reimarus' biblical interpretation. This is the true source for the criterion of dissimilarity that affects Räsänen's criticism to such a degree that it cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, the historical-critical method as a whole is also a theme of its own, at least for Räsänen's own investigations. Its analysis leads to questions concerning the Rankean view of history and, through Troeltsch, the problem of historicism. A great influence on these issues is Kant, whose view on theology has changed biblical criticism probably more than any other individual theory in European philosophy.

There can be no analysis of Protestant, scientific investigation of the Bible without an assessment of Rudolf Bultmann. The Bultmannian revision of Heidegger's existentialism has no doubt affected Räsänen's theology, but his reception of these ideas is far from clear. And the story continues. He turns yet another new corner when Derrida, Barthes and Foucault enter the discussion. There are structuralist traits in some of Räsänen's ideas, and in certain respects he is not that far from poststructuralism, either. At least his keen interest in Berger's sociology of knowledge leads in that direction. But how does this fit in with Räsänen's earlier views on historicism? And does anything really change before *The Rise* is written? The poststructuralist connection raises further the question about whether there are traits from the death-of-God theology in Räsänen's writings. Many of the principles of Christian atheism, as they

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<sup>14</sup> See especially chapter 8 at the end of the study.

call it, can be detected in Räisänen's books. How far is he willing to go in his reinterpretation of Christian theology?

The following analysis will thus focus on several large traditions both in Western philosophy and Protestant theology. This book could be read either as an analysis of Räisänen's hermeneutics, or as an analysis of the development of Protestant scientific interpretation of the Bible during the era of historical criticism, with certain remarks on Räisänen. In addition to this, the present book could probably be read as an analysis of the conflict between sociological hermeneutics and textual hermeneutics. Or it could also be read as an extensive analysis of the history-of-religion hermeneutics that found its final form in Räisänen's recent monograph *The Rise of Christian Belief*. All these aspects are present in the book.

Nevertheless, the main subject of my analysis should be clear enough: it concerns the understanding of Räisänen's hermeneutical method called *the chain of interpretation* as a highly relevant representative of German-rooted biblical criticism in Western scholarship. Räisänen builds on the historical-critical tradition, as scholars usually call it, and he develops a "scientific" approach to the Scriptures. In addition to this, he wishes to present a way to interpret the emergence of Christian belief. Here he usually goes *beyond* the efforts of other scholars, as one of the titles in his books suggests. Therefore, Räisänen's hermeneutics can be considered as an original attempt to unite all the essential features of scientific biblical interpretation into one comprehensive theory. How well he succeeds in this will be assessed in the present analysis.

There are a few monographs and articles that have already been written on Räisänen's works but none of them investigates the precise area of biblical interpretation. Other investigations have discussed some particular aspects of his theology, though. The Hungarian scholar Peter Balla wrote an analysis of the principles of New Testament theology called *Challenges to New Testament theology* (1997).<sup>15</sup> He starts with Räisänen's Wredean position and critically investigates it but deals also widely with the genesis of the investigation of New Testament theology in general. He discusses the problems concerning orthodoxy, the canon and diversity, to name a few issues. Balla's work does treat issues that deal with hermeneutics but the work does not have Räisänen's final monograph on theology in its horizon.

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<sup>15</sup> See Balla, *Challenges*, 1–3.

Furthermore, T.E. van Spanje has presented an extensive analysis on Räisänen's theology and Pauline studies in his *Inconsistency in Paul?* (1999).<sup>16</sup> His book too treats some of the issues investigated in the present work, especially concerning Romans 1–9 but, as the title suggests, van Spanje focuses mainly on Räisänen's view on Paul. Van Spanje's main conclusion is that Räisänen, in his treatment of Paul's alleged inconsistency, focuses on questions of logic. The festschrift *Fair play: diversity and conflicts in early Christianity (Essays in Honour of Heikki Räisänen)* does present a significant collection of essays written by over twenty prominent scholars, but as the genre suggests, the writings contain little analysis of Räisänen's own work.

Papers from an SBL meeting called "Whence and Whither? Methodology and the Future of Biblical Studies" (Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting in Rome, 2001) serve the analysis better. These essays directly discuss Räisänen's views of New Testament theology. They have been published under the title *Moving Beyond New Testament Theology? Essays in Conversation with Heikki Räisänen* (2005). These addresses are interesting and useful, taking up several details in the present discussion. They will be discussed thoroughly during the analysis.

As regards hermeneutics, several books have turned out to be fruitful in the analysis. Peter Stuhlmacher's *Vom verstehen des Neuen Testaments* (NTD, 1986) is still useful, and to be preferred to Hans Weder's *Neutestamentliche Hermeneutik* (from the same year) which, however, is not without significance itself. In Finland I constantly use Miikka Ruokanen's *Hermeneutica moderna* (1987), but the work is available only in Finnish. In the field of philosophy Hans Ineichen's *Philosophische Hermeneutik* (1991) treats many important issues well. Of the more recent monographs Anthony C. Thiselton's skillful *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (2009) should be especially mentioned, and I prefer it to Charles J. Scalise's *Hermeneutics as Theological Prolegomena: A Canonical Approach* (1994) which admittedly also has provided stimulating thought about the field.<sup>17</sup>

The subject of the present study is so broad that, in particular chapters on different issues, one always has to choose between a general commentary

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<sup>16</sup> See the Introduction in van Spanje, *Inconsistency*, 1–5. Räisänen also appears in several general introductions to Pauline studies, such as Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*.

<sup>17</sup> One could also mention the well-known treatment of hermeneutics by Robert Morgan and John Barton, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, as well as Werner Jeanrond's rather linguistic presentation *Theological Hermeneutics*.

and a thorough analysis followed by an extensive discussion with secondary literature. This problem has been solved by selecting certain issues where a detailed analysis is given and then applying the results to a more comprehensive general interpretation of Räisänen's hermeneutics. The disadvantage of this approach is that, in some passages, it is possible to discuss only with a limited amount of literature. Even so the bibliography grows rather extensive. Apart from standard secondary literature there are certain monographs that need to be taken into account because they have profoundly affected Räisänen's thinking. Ernst Käsemann has been important for the young Räisänen, as have been E.P. Sanders' works. For hermeneutics, I refer especially to certain books written by James Barr on the one hand, and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, on the other.<sup>18</sup>

The main area where biblical hermeneutics comes into practice today is New Testament theology, and this issue also belongs to Räisänen's main interests—though with a changed methodology and aspiration. In this field the list of literature is unending but in the study, for instance, A.K.M. Adam's *Making Sense of New Testament Theology* and James Mead's *Biblical Theology: Issues, Methods, and Themes* will be used. In Germany we find collections from different phases of the discussion. Earlier views are well represented in G. Strecker's collection *Das Problem der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (1975). Two decades later there was a symposium on these issues in honor of Strecker, edited by F. Horn, *Bilanz und Perspektiven gegenwärtiger Auslegung des Neuen Testaments* (1995). More recently a new collection edited by Chilliers Breytenbach and Jörg Frey has been published, *Aufgabe und Durchführung einer Theologie des Neuen Testaments*.<sup>19</sup>

One biographical glimpse of Räisänen's personal development as a New Testament scholar may be of interest here. On his last public lecture before his retirement from the chair at the Helsinki University, Räisänen looked back and assessed the issues that have influenced his investigations and writings. He spoke openly about his personal crisis when first

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<sup>18</sup> Barr's monograph *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* appears to be of crucial importance to Räisänen, as does his book *Fundamentalism*. Räisänen remarks that one of his Finnish books on hermeneutics and biblical studies would have been left unpublished had he not found support in the monograph written by Barr. Furthermore, Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* is a book to which Räisänen gives constant credit in his later works.

<sup>19</sup> It should probably be noted that recent New Testament theologies usually also have long introductions discussing methodological issues. These texts will be noted in chapter 6.

encountering the historical-critical investigation of the Bible as a young student. He also saw that those early events affected his entire career, directing his interests and his selection of subjects. He has written a great deal on questions concerning the principles of biblical criticism, theological liberalism, fundamentalism, dogmatic conservatism, and personal faith. Some of these personal issues influencing the development of his hermeneutics will be discussed during the analysis by referring to Räsänen's Finnish books and articles not available in any other language. The treatment of such questions is necessary because, in the area of hermeneutics, there is no issue that could be more crucial for any interpretation than the question about God.<sup>20</sup>

But there is more to it. Räsänen also told his hearers that the time he spent in Quran studies and the science of religion was crucial for his thinking. After writing his monographs on the Quran, he also wrote a manuscript on the relationship between New Testament studies and the methodology of the science of religion, dealing with the processes of the religious mind behind both the Bible and the Quran. These ideas were later to grow into a complete interpretation theory. The manuscript as such was never published, but its main ideas can be found in the above-mentioned *Teologinen Aikakauskirja* article called "Uskontotiede ja eksegetiikka" ["The science of religion and exegetics"].<sup>21</sup>

During his last lecture Räsänen actually pointed out several times that one's early findings influence one's whole career. A scholar often spends his entire life working on ideas he or she has invented before turning 30 years old. This is not a mere playful thought. Räsänen's history of religion appears to embody this reflective conclusion exactly. His early works both on the Bible and the Quran form the basis for his revolutionary ideas in his *Beyond New Testament Theology*. This book, in turn, inspired him to work for more than two decades on the history of religion of early Christian thought, the results of which were finally published as *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*. In this respect, one is entitled to formulate a hypothesis that Räsänen's early articles, beginning in the 1970s, can help to explain *The Rise*.

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<sup>20</sup> This farewell lecture was later published in Finnish, see Räsänen, *Vartija* 3 (2006) 83–95.

<sup>21</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 102 (1997) 119–125. In the Lutheran tradition "exegetics" means simply biblical studies.

## CHAPTER ONE

### FROM RICCOLDO TO REIMARUS TO RÄISÄNEN

Heikki Räisänen is well known both for his studies on Paul and his theory of biblical interpretation. What is less commonly known is his interest in the early development of historical critical investigation of the Bible. As we aim at an analysis of Räisänen's interpretation theory these issues must be addressed since some of his early choices and commitments clarify several features in his hermeneutics. Therefore, the present analysis will first focus on the earliest possible phase of the scientific investigation of the Scriptures, namely on the genesis of Hermann Reimarus' historical criticism.

#### 1.1. *The Significance of Fourteenth Century Quran-criticism*

In European scholarship there is a long and complex tradition behind the first attempts to apply methods of secular historical investigation to biblical texts. As a young scholar Räisänen was well aware of the early phases of such study since, in Finland, he belonged to a group of scholars who studied the new methods and approaches that flourished in German Lutheran scholarship from Göttingen to Marburg. This led him to the roots of historical critical investigation. While there are too many details signalling Räisänen's interest to mention explicitly, it is apparent that he has always been well versed in the development of the historical approach. He also mentions and discusses the famous pioneers of the historical critical method in his numerous books on biblical studies.<sup>1</sup>

Medieval Quran criticism is naturally not the first subject that leaps to mind when searching for the earliest roots of historical criticism of the Bible—and it may also sound surprising as a criteria for investigating Räisänen's premises. There are several good reasons, however, for starting with this particular subject since Räisänen himself writes much about the Quran. In a general sense it is obvious that Hermann Reimarus'

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<sup>1</sup> These details will be dealt with especially in chapter 2. For Räisänen's personal history I refer to Räisänen, *Vartija* 3 (2006) 83f.



provocative pamphlets are well known among scholars, and Deism's influence on the emergence of the German historical-critical method is generally acknowledged. Reimarus' other sources, however, namely the work of early continental apologists, has remained in the shadows. Rationalists wanted to read the Bible in the same manner they read other literature, a demand repeated even by Räsänen.<sup>2</sup>

But what kind of literature was meant by this statement? These scholars did not refer primarily to Josephus, and they hardly ever mentioned Homer or Aristophanes. Instead they spoke about the Quran and their medieval predecessors who provided a precise methodology for the historical investigation of ancient religious texts. We face a new field here and, therefore, must be cautious about leaping to conclusions too swiftly in this question. A distinction needs to be made between a mere adoption of a general tradition and the possibility of direct influence. If the Bible was to be read as the Quran was, where did these ideas come from? Who adopted them and who promoted them? And what were the methods for reading the Quran in the eighteenth century, or even earlier? This web of questions needs to be unraveled issue by issue. This will help us understand how Räsänen ended up with his views on the Bible and the Quran.

One thing is to be noted in the beginning. Räsänen has always been interested in the possibility of investigating the Quran in terms of the historical-critical method. Soon after writing his dissertation on the New Testament, he turned to Quran studies, as noted above in the Introduction. His two monographs on the Quran, *Das koranische Jesusbild* (1971) and *The Idea of Divine Hardening* (1972) were written as critical studies but with an attempt to apply methods better known in scientific studies of religion. Räsänen is familiar with medieval Quran critics such as Riccoldo. In the very beginning of *Das koranische Jesusbild* Räsänen starts his analysis by referring to Christian medieval Quran criticism.

From the days of *Johannes Damascenus* until the nineteenth century people in the Christian world, almost without exception, have written polemically about Islam. John Damascene, in his writing *De haeresibus*, treats Mohammad's doctrine as a Christian heresy. He attempts to show numerous errors and ludicrous views (*gelōtos axia*) in the Quran.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See my analysis in Eskola, *JTI* 4 (2010) 229–252.

<sup>3</sup> Räsänen, *Das koranische Jesusbild*, 7. "Von den Tagen des *Johannes Damascenus* bis tief in das 19. Jahrhundert hinein hat man in der christlichen Welt fast ausnahmslos in polemischen Ton über den Islam geschrieben. *Damascenus* behandelt in seiner Schrift *De haeresibus* die Lehre Mohammeds als eine christliche Häresie. Er will im Koran zahlreiche



Of the medieval authors Riccoldo is mentioned in this context as one who represented ‘the climax’ of the critical tradition. Räisänen also refers to Ludovico Marracci who later in, 1698, wrote a massive *Refutatio Alcorani* to accompany the new Latin translation of the Quran. These writers will be investigated later in more detail.

Two observations are striking already in the beginning of this analysis. Firstly, Räisänen classifies traditional Christian attitudes towards the Quran as polemical and negative, which as such is not yet surprising. Secondly, however, the issues he mentions, such as errors and ludicrous views, sound perplexingly familiar. They are features that Räisänen himself addresses later in his own analyses, as we shall see. And they are standard criteria used in the historical-critical investigation of the Bible. For Reimarus they actually meant the start of a new critical attitude completely. Therefore, an evident question hovers in the air: are these issues presented here as examples of certain criteria that need to be applied in any text when it is submitted to the scrutiny of historical-critical study? In other words, are these criteria to be avoided or must they be used to read the Bible in the way they are used to read the Quran? And if the latter is correct, is Räisänen right in calling such an approach polemical or condemning it as negative? Now we must turn to our main subject. Can we find any connection between the medieval Quran criticism and the earliest historical-critical investigation of the Bible?

Certain preliminary observations do lead in this direction. When the earliest methods for the critical investigation of the Bible emerged, scholars were not yet interested in the empirical problems of literary criticism. Neither did they try to detect sources behind the extant text. First proponents of German historical-critical investigation were mainly concerned about the content. They did not focus on processes of compilation or composition but, instead, on the Bible’s religious intentions. In their interpretations, scholars applied *Sachkritik*, criticism of the content. This attitude was well known from several European books written against the Quran. Therefore, the question emerges, could the methodology of reading the Bible in the earliest phase of the historical investigation be based on medieval apologetic criticism of the Quran?<sup>4</sup>

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Fehler und ‘lächerliche’ (*gelôtos axia*) Behauptungen aufzeigen.” Räisänen not only refers to the “polemical tone” of critics from the Damascene to the nineteenth century but he also mentions particular criteria used in the criticism.

<sup>4</sup> Quran criticism is not mentioned in standard works on the history of biblical criticism. Albert Schweitzer did discuss Reimarus’ views at length, since the latter was the

In order to proceed in this rather difficult task we need to divide it into smaller questions. What is special about the earliest scholarship on biblical issues? Modern readers probably pay attention to the theological, if not philosophical, nature of the critical approach. The historical criticism of Hermann Reimarus and David Strauss, for instance, is a precursor to ideas known in the philosophy of religion. Their aim is to discuss the proper nature of religion itself, not just the content of the Scriptures. However, their attitude towards traditional Christian faith is explicitly negative and even hostile. One might even speak of malevolent motives behind the writings. The scientific discussion has avoided an essential question present even since the days of those grand figures of German historical criticism. What could generate such hostility on the level of methodology? Where did these first scholars learn this? There is one simple answer to these questions.

Negative attitudes and hostile approaches are well known in the area of Quran criticism. Already in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Christian theologians wished to respond to Islamic claims that the New Testament is filled with forgeries. The origin of such a confrontation was naturally in the Quranic belief that proper history must have resembled the story the Quran itself presented. Christians had distorted real history and especially the picture of Jesus. This explained why the New Testament and the Quran differ in their descriptions. Christian apologetics wanted to reverse the direction of such claims. Hence, Christian medieval Quran criticism argued in meticulous detail that and how the Quran was not a consistent entity. It was the Quran that had been written after biblical times. Therefore it was the Quran that distorted the biblical teaching of proper soteriology, which further explained why there was no Trinity in these writings. The Quran also denied that Jesus was really the Son of God.<sup>5</sup>

Medieval Quran criticism was full of even more detailed criticism. Writers such as Riccoldo da Monte di Croce and Peter de Pennis assume that

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first innovator in this field. He analysed the importance of Deism for the early phase but he never investigated the origins of Reimarus' ideas. Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 13–26. In W.G. Kümmel's overview on the history of research, the Quran is not mentioned. Kümmel, *Investigation*, 120. Neither is it referred to in William Baird's work, not even when Reimarus is analysed. Baird, *History*, 170–173. Furthermore, Reventlow's thorough overview on biblical criticism neglects Quran criticism when treating Reimarus and other early scholars. Reventlow, *Bibelauslegung*, 157–166.

<sup>5</sup> There are some remarks on medieval Quran criticism already in Southern, *Western Views of Islam*, 84f. A wider analysis can be found in Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 67–93.

the Quran is filled with contradictory passages. The text contains mutually exclusive statements on several issues. For instance, in one passage the rich are condemned to be left outside heaven, and in another passage Abraham himself is said to have been rich even according to human standards. Other authors also provide long lists of contradictory subjects. San Pedro states that the Quran is not clear about the salvation of Christians. One passage says that they will be saved, another denies it. San Pedro also remarks that there is uncertainty about the judgment of evil people in the final eschaton and about the origin of evil itself: is the good from God and evil from human beings? Such tensions and contradictions make it impossible for him to believe that the text would be a product of divine inspiration.<sup>6</sup>

Riccoldo's *Confutatio Alcorani* from 1300 can be considered the most persistent and influential work in this field. He presents several criteria according to which the Quran cannot be held to be divine revelation, or "God's Law" as the term goes. Firstly, Riccoldo says that the Quran's literary style and expression are not proper for divine revelation since the text is composed of "rhyming and poetry." This is not a style for revealed wisdom, he states. According to Riccoldo, it is not even typical of philosophers. Therefore, it is doomed to remain a mere play or songwriting. Secondly, Riccoldo claims that the Quran does not teach about God correctly. It just repeats superlatives and adjectives in its hymnic reverence. Thirdly, the text is full of shameless words that do not belong in a Holy Book. And finally, according to Riccoldo, the Quran is full of fairy tales and useless fables which have no connection with real life.<sup>7</sup>

Other medieval critics state that the Quran contains false prophecy. It is a religious fraud full of invented promises starting with the essential claim that Jesus himself would have prophesied the birth of a new prophet. Following this logic through, not even Muhammad could fulfil the demands of a proper prophet. Such severe criticism refers to the fact that even some Muslim philosophers, such as ibn Sina, admit that some vain promises and false prophecies have later been added to the original texts of the Quran. These comprise descriptions of heavenly gifts and rewards which can be seen as tokens of greed.<sup>8</sup> Daniel remarks that Riccoldo and his

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<sup>6</sup> See Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 83–85.

<sup>7</sup> See the English translation in *Islam in the Crucible (Confutatio)*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 86.

predecessors had made a vast compilation of materials against the Quran so that, in the end, it became a dictionary against Islam:

Riccoldo's attitude seems to represent that of his contemporaries in an extreme form. From all the polemic that he had inherited, both the books and the living tradition, he constructed an encyclopaedic refutation of Islam from which nothing he had ever heard was omitted, and this is specially noticeable in his treatment of the present theme.<sup>9</sup>

According to medieval apologetics, the Quran has been constructed of different contradictory sources. The text is especially inconsistent and full of tensions because other fabulous and legendary stories have been added during the process of compilation. All this has been done in order to create a confident picture about the leader of the religious community. Furthermore, this religious writing, according to the apologists, contradicts any logical and systematic concept of faith. Therefore, the Quran is considered to oppose philosophy, which is evident already due to its fable-ridden nature. In this respect, the critics stated, it is identical with Jewish faith. According to the apologists, only Christian faith is consistent enough to be justified by logic and can be accepted also in terms of philosophical thought.

All this took place in the fourteenth century. Are bridges between these writings and the emerging scientific investigation of the early eighteenth century in Germany even possible? One might assume that the first point of departure prevents any adoption of medieval principles in the age of reason—but this is not the case. In Lutheran Germany one can find a very interesting and relevant missing link. Martin Luther himself had actually translated the abovementioned *Confutatio Alcorani* into German. Luther translated Riccoldo's work during the last years of his life. The German edition called *Bruder Richards Verlegung des Alkoran* was published in 1542.<sup>10</sup>

This translation allowed German theology to absorb many of the principles of early Quran criticism. The aim of such interpretation was

<sup>9</sup> Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 87.

<sup>10</sup> See the German edition of Riccoldo's text *Bruder Richards Verlegung des Alkoran*, WA 53, 272–396 (Walch 20.2218–2285). Cf. also Pfothenhauer's translation published under the title *Islam in the Crucible (Confutatio)*. Riccoldo, originally from Florence, was a Dominican father and missionary at the end of the Crusades. He was also something of an adventurer who traveled in the Middle East from 1288 onwards. He stayed in Baghdad for several years studying the Quran and having endless discussions with Muslim teachers. This is how he gained special expertise on Islamic thought. Schmidt, M.A., Ricaldo. In: *RGG 3. Auflage* 5 (1986) 1089–1090.

apparently to show that the Quran was full of mistakes and even lies. Riccoldo followed Augustine's principle:

St. Augustine opines that if one small lie were to be found in the Gospel, it would make sense to discard the entire Gospel as useless twaddle. *Fidei non potest falsum subesse*. "Faith cannot be built upon lies."<sup>11</sup>

Armed with this thesis, Riccoldo presents a ten item list that shows how the Quran is full of lies. Riccoldo's list is rather special and unconventional since the issues he treats concern both historical matters and theology. The Quran's lies concern for example Muhammad's status, the unity of the concept of God and the apostles. Riccoldo treats the nature of the Devil, angels, and the person of Mary. As expected, the most problematic lies concern the nature of Christ. Riccoldo discusses Jesus' divinity, the denial of the crucifixion, and finally the Trinity.

I will present Muhammad's errors under ten points. He errs about himself, about Christians, about Jews, concerning the apostles, regarding the Patriarchs, the devils, angels, the Virgin Mary, Christ and God. He errs by presenting himself as the seal, the last, the final prophet.<sup>12</sup>

He speaks untruths about Christ, saying that Christ never claimed to be God or the Son of God. Muhammad claims that Christ excused himself before God, saying he never taught the world such a thing.<sup>13</sup>

He says Christ did not die by crucifixion; rather God will allow him to die at the end of the world. If Muhammad holds to the truthfulness of the gospel (as he boasts), why then does he lie about the gospel? If he considers it false, why does he praise it? It was made plain above that Muhammad deceives when he says the gospel was universally corrupted.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to this, he states that there are violent traits in the Quran. The book is a "law of death and rage" ("ein Gesetz des Todes und Wüthens," X.128). These features are, for Riccoldo, grounds for the conviction that the Quran must be of human origin since it contains lies.<sup>15</sup> Riccoldo also pays attention to style. He states that divine revelation must be formally

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<sup>11</sup> *Islam in the Crucible (Confutatio)*, 72; cf. Verlegung IX,97. Pfothenhauer's translation is often somewhat inaccurate and short, but it can be used whenever the original idea is present.

<sup>12</sup> *Islam in the Crucible (Confutatio)*, 63–64.

<sup>13</sup> *Islam in the Crucible (Confutatio)*, 68.

<sup>14</sup> *Islam in the Crucible (Confutatio)*, 68–69.

<sup>15</sup> *Verlegung* X.128 (a word for word translation is given here, since the English translation does not express the original so precisely), cf. *Islam in the Crucible (Confutatio)*, 80.

correct. It must be expressed according to a grand style and eloquent discourse. Apart from these issues he further criticizes different contradictions he detects between several passages. These problems had aroused the attention of other medieval authors as well. Contradictory statements and devotional instructions were considered further evidence for the claim that the Quran could not be a "Law of God." This was confirmed by the notion that there is no order or any sense of historical sequence in the text: "There is no order in the Koran, no keeping track of times or years, no naming of kings or who was in power. Furthermore, the subject matter is not presented in an orderly manner."<sup>16</sup>

Since Luther had deliberately wanted to translate Riccoldo's conclusions he apparently had a use for the text in mind. He wanted to prove that the Quran could not be considered divine revelation in his (Luther's) own time. In Germany the principles of Quran criticism had a deliberate aim. Their purpose was to prove that a contradictory writing full of lies and tales was a contradiction to logic and therefore, also against true theology and valid philosophy. This attitude becomes evident when reading Luther's strict concluding words for the book (printed after chapter XVII of the original text). This interpretation was based on the idea of a polarization between an ideal text and a corrupt text. True revelation, from Augustine to Riccoldo to Luther, had to be perfect. It had to be consistent and clear without dissonance. Poetic materials, imaginative stories, and signs of human contemplation were marks of a distorted writing. There was an ideal for revelatory style and the Bible was believed to be its greatest expression.<sup>17</sup>

When the first innovator and developer of what was to become the historical critical investigation of the Bible, Hermann Reimarus in the 18th century, started to demand that the Bible be read in precisely the same manner as other ancient literature, he never meant Homer or some other poet from the early Greek tradition. This is understandable since scholars investigating Greek philology had not applied rationalistic criteria to the writings they studied. Their primary interest was not in assessing whether for instance the writings of Plato and Aristotle were ideologically valid or perhaps even full of lies. Reimarus simply meant the Quran. He claimed

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<sup>16</sup> *Islam in the Crucible (Confutatio)*, 38f.; 82–83; cf. *Verlegung* VI.48–51. For the translation, see XI.140: "Aber im Alkoran ist gar keine Ordnung, da ist keine Rechnung der Zeit oder Jahre, keine Person der Könige oder Regenten derselbigen Zeit, auch keine ordentliche Rede der Sachen."

<sup>17</sup> *Islam in the Crucible (Confutatio)*, 126f.

that the Bible must be read according to those principles with which western readers read the Quran. Reimarus directed his criticism toward the lack of consistency in biblical writings as well as problems of style.

### 1.2. *Reimarus, the Quran, and the Criterion of Dissimilarity*

Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), a teacher of oriental languages in Hamburg, was among the most prominent Deists on the continent. He adopted most of the principles laid down by English Deists during the same century and wrote several articles and essays on natural religion. Some of his books also treat Deism. In his works he mentions for instance John Toland and Anthony Collins both of whom had greatly inspired him. On the continent, however, he was the follower of Christian Wolff who had already appeared as an apologist for natural religion in Germany. Reimarus surpasses Wolff's treatment of religion, though. He is an orientalist, as well, which is how he became widely acquainted with ancient manuscripts and their relevant investigation.<sup>18</sup>

In the spirit of Deism Reimarus wrote studies about Christianity and the Bible but never published them. He was in the process of writing a monograph *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (Apology or Defence for the Rational Reverers of God). During his lifetime only some parts of the writing were known, and they circulated in the hands of carefully selected readers. Later the writer and librarian G.E. Lessing printed a great part of Reimarus' texts, and they were posthumously published under the name *Wolfenbüttel Fragments* (*Wolfenbütteler Fragmente*).<sup>19</sup>

In Lessing's later *Collected Works* they have been published under the title *Fragmente eines Ungenannten*, Fragments of an Anonymous Author. Lessing claimed to have found the texts by chance in his library's store-rooms. After this the radical nature of Reimarus' texts soon became the focus of wide interest and vivid discussion. Kümmel notes that, apart from certain observations concerning some details in biblical texts, the writings

<sup>18</sup> For Reimarus' life and works in general, see Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 13–26; Schultze, H., Reimarus, *TRE* 18 (1997) 470–473; Reventlow, *Bibelauslegung*, 157. A larger overview can now be found in Dietrich Klein's monograph *Hermann Samuel Reimarus* (2009).

<sup>19</sup> Reimarus' books are discussed at length in Klein, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus*, 67–106. Furthermore, his work is put nicely in context in Gerhard Freund's article "Ein Trojaner: Lessings Reimarus-Fragmente als Anfrage an die zeitgenössische Theologie," in: *500 Jahre Theologie im Hamburg*, 133–152.



make full use of Deistic themes. Firstly, Jesus' message is considered political and, secondly, Jesus' disciples are assumed to have altered this message after their leader's death and thus betrayed their listeners.<sup>20</sup>

Many subtitles in the *Fragments* betray Reimarus' program. There are essays such as "The Toleration of the Deists," and "The Impossibility of a Revelation which all men should have good grounds for believing." The most famous one of the fragments deals with Jesus and the Gospels: "The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples" ("Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger"). Reimarus' aim is to define the main features of natural religion and criticize the Bible as a fraud based on that original faith.<sup>21</sup>

Even though Reimarus' fierce attack on Christian doctrine and faith is noted in different presentations of the history of research, he is usually considered the first practitioner of a historical approach to the Scriptures. His methods are simply presented as scientific and generally accepted in other faculties of the time. Thus, Reimarus becomes a forerunner of a scientific investigation of the Bible. His groundbreaking work is celebrated in that, in the beginning, conservative scholars so opposed his work that he and his followers could bring these new ideas into the public only under a pseudonym.<sup>22</sup>

The question about Reimarus' intentions and reputation is deceptively simple. Concerning the theses of natural religion, Reimarus had published his ideas quite openly already in his *Die vornehmsten Wahrheiten der natürlichen Religion* (*The Leading Truths of Natural Religion*, 1754). In this respect they were not new to those who knew his Deistic convictions or the Wolffian tradition in Germany. David Strauss, who later wrote Reimarus' biography, is probably right in saying that Reimarus just wanted to avoid any provocation concerning the Scriptures of the Church. In his

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<sup>20</sup> These fragments will be found in the Hempel edition of Lessing's works, *Lessing's Werke* 15. In addition to new translations, I will also often give the original German text below in the footnotes since the texts are not easily available. There is an English translation of the fragment "On the Intentions of Jesus and His Disciples" in Talbert, *Reimarus: Fragments*, but other fragments have been more or less neglected in scholarly discussion. See also Kümmel, *Investigation*, 89–90; cf. Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 13–26.

<sup>21</sup> See Reimarus (*Lessing's Werke* 15), 289. These are the translations for the titles given in Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 15. Translation for the text of the "Aims of Jesus" can be found in Talbert, *Reimarus: Fragments*, 61f. Talbert translates the title: "Concerning the Intention of Jesus and his teaching."

<sup>22</sup> Kümmel criticizes such a view, though. He does not think that Reimarus was the real initiator of the quest for the historical Jesus. Instead, Reimarus' work was based on ideas he had taken over from the English Deism. Kümmel, *Investigation*, 90. In twentieth century German scholarship there apparently was a tendency to undervalue the influence of Reimarus' ideological hermeneutics in biblical investigation.



writings Reimarus holds nothing back, even though he does not openly oppose Christian faith and the Church's doctrine.<sup>23</sup>

As a defender of natural religion Reimarus wrote an apology "for the Rational Reverers of God," as his title proclaimed. Here the English Deists he knew so well were of great help. For biblical criticism, however, it is noteworthy that Reimarus defines his treatment of individual texts along the lines of Quran criticism. Starting with the end of the first fragment where Lessing summarizes Reimarus' view of the Quran, Riccoldo's principles become the guidelines of interpretation. Riccoldo himself remains anonymous. The passage states that Muhammad's Quran and the religion of the Turks "has a bad reputation among us, not merely because the founder of the religion has exploited fraud and violence, but also because it contains many insane things and errors along with unnecessary and irrelevant habits."<sup>24</sup>

First of all Reimarus contests the revelatory nature of the Quran by referring to the mistakes of the text and the godless content of the story. Then he argues on the basis of a reality principle he himself defines. According to Reimarus, the real religion behind the presentation of the Quran must be identical with a natural religion—or at least it can be interpreted as one:

I am convinced that if it were my task to present the principles of natural religion by the help of the Quran I could make it in detail and in some part even in a very beautiful way, and I believe that I could also rather easily find acceptance for the fact that almost every essential point in Mohammad's doctrine is derived from natural religion.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Strauss, *Reimarus*, 23–25. Steiger assumes that had the fragments been published Reimarus could not have held his office at the *Akademischen Gymnasium*. Steiger, *500 Jahre Theologie im Hamburg*, 123.

<sup>24</sup> "Des Mahomet's Alkoran, sagt auch unser Unbekannte kurz vor der mitgetheilten Stelle, 'und der türkische Glaube hat zwar einen bösen Ruf bei uns, nicht allein weil der Stifter dieser Religion Betrugerei und Gewalt gebraucht, sondern auch weil viele Thorheiten und Irrthümer nebst mancen unnöthigen äusserlichen, hergebrachten Gebräuchen sich eingemischet finden'." Reimarus (*Lessing's Werke* 15), 100. As regards knowledge of Islam and the Quran at that time one should remember that Reimarus' predecessor at the *Akademischen Gymnasium* was the well-educated and revered scholar Johann Christoph Wolf. Wolf was a specialist in the science of religion and often commented on issues concerning the Quran. See Mulsow, *500 Jahre Theologie im Hamburg*, 88–89.

<sup>25</sup> Reimarus (*Lessing's Werke* 15), 100. From the very start it is worth noting that neither this aspect nor the Quran are mentioned in the early articles on Reimarus in theological dictionaries. After Strauss scholarship has neglected the theme.

After these conclusions Reimarus identifies the Bible with the Quran in many ways. He claims that they are the product of a similar religious enthusiasm. Furthermore, both texts are based on a similar concept of a historical religion. As religious systems, however, they must be merely products of devotional human beings, and this is also why they both reflect a belief that these writings represent inerrant truth. Reimarus reminds his readers that the Turks believe in the divine nature of Muhammad's revelation, the "divine origin of the Quran." The very same attitude can be found in the Bible and in Christianity. This is why, for Reimarus, the standard according to which these texts shall be interpreted must be found outside the writings themselves. How does one decide, then, which writing can really be considered a revelation of God?<sup>26</sup>

The answer is found in the Augustinian tradition which is revitalized in Reimarus' analysis. He presents it in a slightly revised form and assumes that divine revelation should present a perfect message:

Should a book prove to be divine revelation, the basis for faith and salvation, one should be able to be entirely convinced that it is the Word of God. Furthermore, one must be convinced that the author, who otherwise is a sinful human being like other people, is better than the others because God had revealed everything to him. So he will not deceive himself and is not going to deceive others.<sup>27</sup>

This old principle known already by Riccoldo will then, according to Reimarus, lead any honest scholar into problems. The Bible is not clear, and its content is not inerrant. One is then entitled to question the basic nature of biblical texts, not just the writings of the Quran. Reimarus' reasoning runs along simple lines. Since there have been quite a number of theories (*Systemata*), sects and heresies in the Christian Church throughout the centuries, the source text itself must be full of problems. The sacred Scriptures are not clear enough to produce just one view about the salvific message.

A book which has not been written in an orderly way, and which is not clear and consistent, but written so that one can infer a hundred different systems (*Systemata*) all based on the text, demands an extremely learned and skillful reader who is completely free of prejudice. This is the only way to make any sense of such a system with any kind of probability.

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<sup>26</sup> Reimarus (*Lessing's Werke* 15), 152.

<sup>27</sup> Reimarus (*Lessing's Werke* 15), 168.

Faith must lie on unshakeable grounds, and one cannot trust a system that is so complex. Instead, says Reimarus, one would need “a true system” (“ein wahres System”). And not just a system. Reimarus also states that the integrity of the people behind the text should be questioned.<sup>28</sup> Can we trust the writers themselves? Are the authors who have produced the texts sincere and innocent in what they do? With this question, he is really asking whether the text is forged or distorted (“verfälscht oder verstümmelt”). A true “revelation,” for Reimarus, should meet the criteria that had earlier been directed against the Quran. It must be able to fulfill all demands for a perfect message and inerrant writing. True revelation must be perfect in both form and historical accuracy. In this respect, an ideal revelation would appear as a book that is a precise copy of a heavenly original. Reimarus had remarked already before that, according to the Turks, Muhammad surely is God’s messenger, and his miracles were real. Furthermore, they were convinced about “the Quran’s divine inspiration and origin.”<sup>29</sup>

Reimarus’ *Fragments* prove, thus, that he wants the investigation of the Bible to proceed like research of the Quran. He never mentions Riccoldo or any other medieval author but he follows every rule and criterion Riccoldo uses in his analysis of the Quran. Both contradictions and unclarity show that the Bible—not merely the Quran—has been written by human beings. Furthermore, lies and descriptions of violent events prove that such a writing cannot consist of divine revelation. Reimarus also states that all revelatory texts must be assessed according to the believable rules (*Regeln*) of historical investigation. Since he is a rationalist, he holds to a hermeneutic that human *ratio* is able to decide by itself whether a text is true or not. Proper revelation must be able to withstand such criticism. Reimarus’ prominent claim is that both the Quran and the Bible prove to be unhistorical according to historical investigation.

Instead, the divine revelation must not only be trustworthy in all this without the slightest error, so that every doubt against it can be proved false,

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<sup>28</sup> The original text goes as follows: “Ein Buch, das nicht systematisch, nicht deutlich und ordentlich, sondern so geschrieben ist, dass hundert verschiedene Systemata daraus genommen werden können, erfordert einen Leser, der ganz ungemene Gelehrsamkeit, Scharfsinnigkeit und Einsicht besitzt und dabei von allen Vorurtheilen vollkommen frei ist, wenn er das darin liegende System nur mit einiger Wahrscheinlichkeit herausbringen soll.” Reimarus (*Lessing’s Werke* 15), 164.

<sup>29</sup> Reimarus (*Lessing’s Werke* 15), 152.

but it must also convince us that as a divine revelation it is different from everything that is of human origin.<sup>30</sup>

As the reader of the Bible meets contradictions and fictitious stories, ("viel Ungereimtes, Widersprechendes, Fabelhaftes, ja Gottloses und Liederliches,") he or she should feel annoyed by virtue of being a reasonable human being.<sup>31</sup> But if there is something acceptable and true in the biblical writing, one needs to check that this cannot be found in other texts such as the Quran (sic!). Reimarus emphasizes that the same criteria must be applied both to the Quran and the Bible.<sup>32</sup> Immoral behavior must not be accepted whatever the religion. Jacob's fraud or Moses' theft and even the description of a murder must be condemned. Here, according to Reimarus, the Bible has no special position vis-à-vis the Quran. Believers are not able to adopt such a critical attitude, says Reimarus, since they have blind faith. Muslims approach their sacred writing with presuppositions similar to those with which Christians approach the Bible.<sup>33</sup>

What does Reimarus conclude from all this? For him, both the Bible and the Quran are similar compilations of useless stories and legends. This confirms his leading principle that the Bible must be read according to the very same standards as any other literature. This thesis is further explained by an imaginative hypothesis of an unprejudiced reader. Reimarus says that if a reader, who has no preliminary knowledge whatsoever about religion and Christian tradition, reads the Bible as a normal text and cultural writing, it appears to him merely as a common novel. It is just a "collection of old tales" ("Sammlung der alten *fabularis historiae*"). His judgment about the content, then, will be much more severe. The Bible will appear to be a "history of madness and evilness," written by fanatics. It is a text "full of priests' frauds." This example and play of imagination, for Reimarus, confirms the fact that the Bible cannot be true. It is not a revelatory text produced by a supernatural effect of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>30</sup> Reimarus (*Lessing's Werke* 15), 171–172.

<sup>31</sup> Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann has shown that, in another writing, Reimarus had developed his "*Offenbarungspolemik*" (polemics against revelation) and detailed criteria for authenticity starting from a similar point of departure. Schmidt-Biggemann, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus 1694–1768*, 50–52. Riccoldo, however, is not mentioned.

<sup>32</sup> A rare anachronism occurs in this passage since Reimarus must have been quite aware that much of the Quran is derived from the Bible.

<sup>33</sup> "Das macht, er kömmt zu seinem Alkoran ebenso vorbereitet wie der Christ zur Bibel." Reimarus (*Lessing's Werke* 15), 169–170.

When human reason “will be the judge” as he says, the Bible is proved to be a mere compilation of tales, legends, drama, and useless stories.<sup>34</sup>

This is where both Reimarus’ analysis and Deistic program unite and are fulfilled. From the very start he wanted to prove that Deism’s conception of religion is the only rational way to speak about God and the nature of his revelation. Through critical investigation he has first shown that the Bible cannot be revelatory. In the historical sense it is a religious fantasy just like the Quran. In the eyes of a humanist living in the tradition of the Enlightenment, Christianity no longer can be seen as a religion of mercy. Instead, biblical texts enslave and exploit people and guide them into evil. Therefore, the medieval apologetics of earlier Quran criticism turns here in Reimarus’ writings into an apology for Deism. “What is left is the only path which can help us to find something valid, it is the speech of nature, the book of nature, God’s creation and the traits of divine perfection.”<sup>35</sup> By reading the great book of nature a person finds his own place in this world, no matter where he has been born and what culture he has adopted. It is always and everywhere possible to find true faith and real religion. In Reimarus’ hermeneutics this concerns barbarians and Greeks, Jews and Christians, wherever one happens to live. The sacred writings of the Bible are just a product of sectarian imagination.

But what about Jesus? The picture of Jesus was bound to change because, according to Reimarus, the New Testament was filled with fictitious stories about the leader of the religion. Gospel stories, for him, do not even resemble proper history but mere legends. Furthermore, it is impossible to read the New Testament consistently in terms of the new naturalist worldview—and this is completely the opposite of what Deism was able to do in its natural theology. Therefore, according to Reimarus’ primary thesis, the real Jesus of history, the “historical Jesus,” was not at all like the Jesus-figure appearing in the apostolic writings. Instead, the biblical Jesus is a fraud, constructed only to meet the needs of the post-Easter community. Only a true scientific investigation, which Reimarus was now aiming at, was able to detect Jesus’ original social program in the Jewish community.

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<sup>34</sup> Reimarus (*Lessing’s Werke* 15), 170. Reimarus thinks that the Bible as a novel should be seen merely as “a story of madness and fraud [...] or an understandable deception of the priests”: “bald für eine Geschichte der Thorheit und Bosheit [...] oder auch verständliche Betrügerei ihrer Priester.”

<sup>35</sup> Reimarus (*Lessing’s Werke* 15), 175.

Reimarus also applies his hermeneutical program to the interpretation of individual stories in the Gospels. This results in a completely new view of the historical Jesus. Reimarus is actually the very first scholar to suggest a distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of the Church's faith taught by the apostles. In one of his most popular passages, quoted several times also later in history, Reimarus states: "We are justified in drawing an absolute distinction between the teaching of the Apostles in their writings and what Jesus Himself in His own lifetime proclaimed and thought."<sup>36</sup>

According to Reimarus' Deistic view, the historical Jesus is but a Jewish prophet teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven, nothing else. Even though his disciples call him the Messiah and even the Son of God in Gospel stories, according to Reimarus this was never meant as a metaphysical statement about Jesus' real nature. Instead, these titles reveal Jesus' political aims. Therefore, Jesus' own Messianic claims during his lifetime also "remain inside the boundaries of humanity." Reimarus is quite practical in this. When we put aside all doctrines of the catechism teaching the Trinity and Jesus' divine origin, we can see that a scientific approach locates Jesus in the midst of the Judaism of his time in a natural way.<sup>37</sup>

The original program of the real historical Jesus went to the grave with its proclaimer, says Reimarus. Jesus himself on the cross cried out that God had forsaken him. Jesus' political program for social reform failed because the people never followed him. This was the first system, *Systema*, as Reimarus calls it. It became meaningless and futile when Jesus died. Therefore, the disciples had to invent a new one. They stole Jesus' body and started to proclaim his second coming, the parousia.

It also shows that the master, and how much more his disciples, found themselves mistaken and deceived by the condemnation and death, and that the new system [*Systema*] of a suffering spiritual savior, which no one had ever known or thought of before, was invented after the death of Jesus, and invented only because the first hopes had failed.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This famous quotation can be found for instance in Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> The main purpose of Reimarus' *Fragments* is to show that the Christian catechism, namely Christian doctrines, direct all later theology of the Church. Jesus' life and history have nothing to do with it. This dogma is then polarized in several passages with the "original" history as Reimarus calls it. His main issue is usually the problem of the Trinity—intriguingly the key dogma that the Quran also criticizes and opposes.

<sup>38</sup> Translation in Talbert, *Reimarus: Fragments*, 151; original in Reimarus (*Lessing's Werke* 15), 358.

This is how Reimarus actually explains the whole genesis of Christian faith. For him, the teaching of the early apostolic Church has almost nothing in common with the proclamation of the historical Jesus. Instead, every statement in the new doctrine is based on the fraud Reimarus had described in his analysis. The apostolic message is a compilation of lies that had to be invented after the deception, the stealing of Jesus' body and the generation of rumors about his resurrection.

Their system then consisted briefly in this: that Christ or the Messiah was bound to die in order to obtain forgiveness for mankind, and consequently to achieve his own glory; that upon the strength of this he arose alive from death out of his tomb upon the third day as he had prophesied, and ascended into heaven, from whence he would soon return in the clouds of heaven with great power and glory to judge the believers and the unbelievers, the good and the bad, and that then the kingdom of glory would commence.<sup>39</sup>

For Reimarus, the crucial problem with the new *Systema* is simply that it is purely a product of the imagination. Its invented eschatology written *ad hoc* in changed situations has not become true, and it could not. Jesus never came back. Therefore, Reimarus concludes that for any rational human being this means a total collapse of traditional Christianity and its doctrines. This is where the new scholarly approach finally proves to be completely identical with earlier Quran criticism. Scholars end up with Reimarus' conclusion, which Albert Schweitzer later made famous: "our Christianity rests upon a fraud."<sup>40</sup>

For Reimarus, the New Testament is a corrupt writing. It is like the Quran of the medieval apologists: a religious fake where Jesus has been made the center of the religion artificially. This is the motivation also behind the effort to create mysterious legends about him. In the context of this kind of setting the task of a scientific reading of the New Testament and a historical investigation of particular texts is to expose the deception. Reimarus wishes to reconstruct real history behind the fictitious story of the Gospels. In practice, this means replacing traditional Christianity with a Deistic view of natural religion.

This hermeneutical move shows further that, in reality Reimarus himself developed the criterion of dissimilarity which later became enormously influential in Protestant biblical criticism. According to the methodical

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<sup>39</sup> Reimarus (*Lessing's Werke* 15), 358.

<sup>40</sup> Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 22. Schweitzer himself also states that a deception can be detected. Its core is that Christian theologians still proclaim the erroneous doctrine of the parousia, Jesus' second coming.



statement the teaching of the real historical Jesus must necessarily be different from the message of the later apostolic Church. The criterion of dissimilarity has thus from the very beginning presupposed that high Christology or messianism, the idea of Jesus' divinity, the proclamation of atonement, and the belief in bodily resurrection, must be the product of the post-Easter Church. Whenever one finds soteriological themes in the Gospels, this criterion classifies them as "unhistorical." The real historical Jesus, according to Reimarus, could never have taught anything that belongs solely to the imaginative theology of the Church's *Systema*. The development of this criterion is the main reason Reimarus' views became so important for the writers in the later *Leben-Jesu* school in Germany.

Reimarus's biblical criticism, thus, has a hermeneutical tone. It is not really interested in history or the compilation of texts. Instead, he aims at a critique of religion. Reimarus selects New Testament passages and ideas in terms of his Deistic ideology. These theological subjects are then proclaimed unhistorical and invented. In addition to this, Reimarus applies what was above called a hermeneutics of malevolent motives. Here the historical Jesus is first described as a political figure who had no religious or Messianic agenda. Every later reference to a divine Savior is then interpreted as deceptive, an intentional addition to the original history, and a false prophecy. According to Reimarus, Jesus has not proved to be the Savior of this world. The New Testament has not proved to be a genuine document of proper religion. Quite the contrary, Reimarus' New Testament is a fraud, and it keeps tempting people to adopt mendacious convictions.

Reimarus' anti-Christian criticism already fulfilled what Daniel in his orientalist studies later states about the relation between Quran criticism and historical investigation of the Bible. When scholars start to apply similar criteria both to the Quran and the Bible, namely the criteria developed by medieval apologists, Christianity too must confront this attack against its Sacred Scriptures.<sup>41</sup> Biblical texts are fragmentary and different passages contradictory with each other. The text is full of historical mistakes. There are theological tensions between different writers. The New Testament too must be a religious fraud. This, for Reimarus, is confirmed by the fact that both the style and formal nature of biblical texts are imperfect. The text does not show the signs of divine inspiration or resemble divine revelation. According to the criticism of rationalistic Deism, the New Testament is just a compilation of religious imaginings which have

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<sup>41</sup> Daniel, *Islam and the West*, 87.



been mixed with original history. When the Bible is read like the Quran it becomes a common book among other books and turns out to be a "history of madness and evilness."

### 1.3. *Quran-Criticism, Sachkritik, and the Birth of Liberal Theology*

Along with new generations Reimarus' ideas found new adherents and disciples, not the least through David Strauss' biography on Reimarus' life and thought. During the nineteenth century Strauss wrote several different investigations on the historical Jesus and here he applied Reimarus' principles. By concentrating on his predecessor he has also effectively directed all later understanding of Reimarus' methodology. His monograph *Hermann Samuel Reimarus und seine Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes* (*H.S.R. and his Defence for a Rational Reverer of God*; 1862) describes the *Fragments* but he is not satisfied with just copying Reimarus' ideas. Strauss also investigates the assumed backgrounds of the Bible and presents his own interpretations. Therefore, one is not quite certain where Reimarus ends and Strauss begins in this monograph.

Unlike several later historians commenting on the birth of the critical, biblical research, Strauss still notes the link between Quran criticism and the historical criticism of the Scriptures. He emphasizes what could be called Reimarus' "fair play" argument according to which similar criteria must be applied to any historical manuscript or sacred writing.

The eighteenth century demanded justice. There were to be no more privileges; what was right for one should be good for the other: the same weight and measure, the same judgment and law are valid for all. Long enough people had held the Jewish and Christian religions alone of all religions true and divine; all others, the so-called heathen religions, such as the Mohammedan, had been held to be false. I would have had to say false and fiendish if it had not become the fashion recently to consider the nonbiblical religions deceptive patchwork fashioned by men. This inequality was unbearable for the eighteenth century because of its expanded historical and geographical perspective.<sup>42</sup>

Strauss' reference to Islam is no coincidence in this context. He still recognizes Reimarus' identification of these two fields of investigation. Strauss also copies his principles and uses them in order to expose faults

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<sup>42</sup> Talbert, *Reimarus: Fragments*, 45; original in Strauss, *Reimarus*, 270–271. Only a short passage of Strauss' work has been translated in Talbert's book on Reimarus.

and contradictions. He even states that style is a relevant criterion when assessing whether some text is divinely inspired or not.

Hence, either the heathen religions, together with Islam, were divine revelation (but how was that possible with such demonstrable error and contradiction that the eighteenth century thought it found within them? and anyway, how was a miraculous revelation consistent with this century's concept of God and the world?), or also Judaism and Christianity were products of human deception on the one hand and human superstition and foolishness on the other.<sup>43</sup>

For Strauss, English Deism was the most important source for new criticism. When explaining Reimarus' relation to Deism he first of all mentions that Reimarus quotes certain British authors in his books. In addition to this, however, Strauss himself appears to be much more interested in particular books written by the Deists. It is true that Reimarus even according to his own words was indebted to the idea of natural religion, but Strauss goes far beyond that. In his biography on Reimarus he refers to every important Deist he can think of: Toland, Collins, Woolston, Annet, Tindal and Morgan. The most important one of them all, however, is one of the earliest developers of Deism, Charles Blount.<sup>44</sup>

Reimarus and Strauss gave birth to a hermeneutical tradition that was to become one of the most influential views in the whole history of biblical criticism. The criterion of dissimilarity would thereafter be applied to Gospel narratives in exactly the same manner as earlier Quran criticism aiming at a critique of religion. It is true that other scholars had also gained some ideologically neutral methods from that period, such as Semler's source criticism. In spite of this, the historical research into the Gospels usually treated the Gospel tradition as religious fake. In the spirit of Reimarus the criterion of dissimilarity was used in order to expose a religious deception. The "Christ of faith" detected with the help of the criterion was considered an imaginative construction of the apostolic period. It was contrasted with a new view of the historical Jesus constructed with the help of a naturalistic world view and the principles of Deism.

Strauss who was the greatest disciple not of Hegel, but Reimarus as we now must say, applied the criterion of dissimilarity with passion in his *Leben Jesu* (I–II, 1835–37). He presented a reductive view of Jesus by going through the Gospel stories one by one reading them according to this

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<sup>43</sup> Talbert, *Reimarus: Fragments*, 45–46.

<sup>44</sup> Strauss, *Reimarus*, 40–42.

principle. Later he continued to follow Reimarus by presenting straightforward criticism of religion in his *Der alte und der neue Glaube* (*The Old and the New Faith*, 1872). Strauss did direct criticism against previous rationalistic scholarship but only in the sense that people had not been able to trace the real history of Gospel stories. According to Strauss, no supernatural story was historically valid. Instead, all such stories had been constructed using a Jewish Messianic myth long after Jesus' time. This is precisely what the criterion of dissimilarity states.<sup>45</sup>

This criterion maintained its influential status primarily due to its new life in Rudolf Bultmann's theology. He popularized it through his programmatic method of form criticism in his *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (1921). In the introduction Bultmann refers to Strauss as the first to develop the approach. As regards the criterion itself, he chooses to quote Martin Kähler's monograph *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historical Biblical Christ* (1892) which actually rooted the dualistic principle into biblical scholarship.<sup>46</sup> The English translation is unable to express the German original which is based on a word-play distinguishing between *Historie*—*Geschichte* (*Der sogenannte historische Jesus und der geschichtliche biblische Christus*), the former denoting "real" history and the latter a kind of "interpreted story." But Bultmann could also have referred to Strauss's book with a similar name from an earlier period. Both of these monographs continue in Reimarus' tradition and assess the "authenticity" of Jesus' words via the criterion of dissimilarity. Unlike Martin Dibelius who also belongs to the developers of form criticism, Bultmann states that scholars must criticize the content of the stories (*sachkritischen Urteilen*), and this assessment concerns for instance "authenticity and the historical facticity of the story."<sup>47</sup>

This is why one is entitled to conclude that a neutral reconstruction of the emergence of Gospel tradition, which has been considered one of the most important aims of New Testament criticism, has never been completely free from Reimarus' criticism of religion and his Deistic presuppositions. Many prominent scholars have been convinced, in the footsteps of Reimarus, that the malevolent motives of the writers have twisted truth concerning authentic history. In their present form, New Testament texts deceive their readers. And it is also well known that, during the reign of

<sup>45</sup> For Strauss' works, see Kümmel, *Investigation*, 120f.

<sup>46</sup> Kähler's point of view is analysed in Kümmel, *Investigation*, 222f.

<sup>47</sup> Bultmann, *Geschichte*, 6.

historical critical scholarship, almost every theological view essential to later Church dogma was classified a post-Easter invention of the early Church. Albert Schweitzer quite devastatingly summarized the first phase of this scholarly tradition in his study on the *Leben-Jesu* investigation:

The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, and died to give His work its final consecration, never had any existence.<sup>48</sup>

Schweitzer's conclusion merely repeats Reimarus' theses. In this respect the study of the historical Jesus has been essentially dependent on the premises Reimarus set forth. As far as historical investigation is concerned, traditional Christianity with its Christological doctrines is based on a lie. And it goes farther since the apologetic enthusiasm Reimarus put forth is promoted also by Schweitzer. He too proclaims that the Church's faith will never be the same again: "He will not be a Jesus Christ to whom the religion of the present can ascribe, according to its long-cherished custom, its own thoughts and ideas, as it did with the Jesus of its own making."<sup>49</sup>

These examples show that the criterion of dissimilarity is used precisely according to the critical approach Reimarus put forth. This kind of research aims at assessing religion's essential nature, as the Deists did, not merely at evaluating or interpreting the texts themselves. There is a standard, a point of departure, for research, and it is Reimarus' conception of "original religion," natural religion. The apostles' imaginative theology with its mythical descriptions is in contradiction particularly to this standard. This is the only reason why several passages in the Jesus-tradition are considered mere inventions. Furthermore, they turn out to be signs of deception because they cannot be divine revelation. The text claiming divine authority is false. Therefore, the criterion of dissimilarity is able to make a distinction and separate inventions of the Church from original religion. This criterion proves that unauthentic Jesus-words are just erroneous and distorted ideas produced by enthusiastic pious imaginations. Reimarus' original intention still directs historical critical investigation. Again the Bible is like the Quran—a compilation of religious propaganda. In a critical analysis it turns out to be not merely a collection of fairy tales and useless fables but also a dangerous pamphlet that attempts to enslave rational human beings under inhuman precepts.

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<sup>48</sup> Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 398.

<sup>49</sup> Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 398–399.

Early medieval Quran criticism has thus influenced remarkably the birth both of the German historical-critical school and biblical interpretation. It has directed the hermeneutical understanding of New Testament writings. Early scholarship, at least in the sphere of the above-mentioned school, was not much interested in literary criticism or questions about tradition. Instead, the basic aim for several authors from Strauss to Bultmann was to detect signs of deception in Gospel stories. And these signs comprised descriptions of Jesus as Savior and a leader of the religion.

The point of departure for the whole line of interpretation can be seen in the Augustinian principle about the faultlessness of the Scriptures. Were there one mistake, the whole Gospel would be under suspicion. When Reimarus, the rationalist Deist, applied this principle to the Bible he had adopted new criteria. Every biblical element that opposed the views of a naturalist worldview was now considered mere pious invention. Therefore, for Reimarus, what was left was a mendacious Bible. Every book in the Bible was full of faults and lies. The Holy Book of the Christians could not meet the criteria Reimarus had developed for the authenticity of a divine revelation. Instead, the Bible was like the Quran, just a desperate attempt to create a religion by inventing religious fables which contradict each other. Neither one of these books, according to Reimarus, was able to produce consistent dogmatics. And what is more important still, they could not reach the level of Deism, a reliable and justifiable view of a religion. In the era of rationalism, Deism had taken the position the Bible had in medieval Quran-criticism.

This hermeneutical approach had two consequences. Firstly, the view of the authentic historical Jesus changed. He became a reductive figure defined by historicism. Secondly, New Testament texts were identified as religious misrepresentations. The aim of scholars from Bultmann to Perin had simply been the detecting and reconstructing of a new religious program, *Systema*, building on the ruins of Jesus' failed program. Nothing distinguishes this effort from Reimarus' approach—or Riccoldo's treatment of the Quran.

The historical-critical investigation of the Bible from this angle, and I mean Reimarus' tradition and the criterion of dissimilarity in particular, has been a theological program. There have been several other criteria in the historical-critical school, of course, but they are beyond the scope of the present analysis. This is not an attempt to explain the whole genesis of modern biblical scholarship with Reimarus' dominating figure. Nevertheless, it is useful to pay attention to this because it has influenced both biblical interpretation and our view of the historical Jesus. Furthermore, a

later semi-Deistic tradition has implicitly adopted a conviction about the only true form of original Christianity, that of natural religion. This conviction's special nature is that, from the very beginning, it has been based on naturalistic materialism and a mechanistic world view. Therefore, this view has opposed traditional Christianity's theology and doctrines from generation to generation to the present day.

Does critical theology really have a task to expose an apostolic deception and liberate modern readers from the slavish religion described in the New Testament? In Reimarus' tradition scholars conduct this kind of project. A critical investigation of the Bible guided by the criterion of dissimilarity has attempted to remove religious lies from biblical theology. Theological hermeneutics generated by a Deism of the past clearly represents secularization. According to the present analysis, such secularization is dependent on medieval Quran criticism. Riccoldo's principles suited the reductionist purposes of rationalistic biblical interpretation well. This is apparently the reason why nineteenth century liberalism adopted these principles for research. The greatest figure behind the critical movement is, somewhat surprisingly, Riccoldo who in the beginning of the fourteenth century hardly could have predicted what his views would develop into in the sphere of biblical investigation.

#### 1.4. *Räisänen's Use of Riccoldo's and Reimarus' Principles*

The analysis thus far has provided some answers to the questions posed in the first subchapter. There is good evidence to believe that Reimarus really did read Quran criticism and used similar criteria in his deistic assessment of the Bible. His direct references to the Quran and bold comparisons between the Quran and the Bible prove this. After Reimarus, however, the tradition ceased. Strauss still knew of the connection, but his Deism found new focuses in the area of history-of-religion. In this phase the criteria still had their essential role in the historical-critical investigation of the Bible, but their origin was forgotten. The slogan remained, however. "The Bible must be read like any other literature." The Quran was no longer mentioned, though.

When Räisänen as a young scholar decided to write on the Quran he no doubt thought that Christian writers had not done justice to the original nature of the text. He called the old approach polemical and wanted to keep his distance from it. It is of course interesting that he knows both Riccoldo, "the climax" of the critical tradition, and Marracci. This,

however, does not yet prove that Räsänen himself would consciously use their criteria in his own work.

The fact remains that Räsänen is well aware of the criteria Marracci presented in his *Refutatio Alcorani*. The latter lists distinct criteria that Räsänen quotes in his work.

The Quran, according to Marracci, is *pene totus emendaciis, erroribus, blasphemiiis, fabulis, nugis confertus et compactus*. The book derives from the Devil and Mohammad himself is a *homo scelestissimus, ac mortalium omnium vituperabilissimus* [a criminal, the most blameable of all mortals].<sup>50</sup>

The criteria, as one might expect, follow the criteria presented by Riccoldo: emendations, errors, blasphemy, tales, full of trifles or trivialities. As noted before, the historical-critical tradition by and large would not treat this kind of criteria merely as negative. Instead, similar criteria are still used in form criticism and redaction criticism today. For Bultmann they were criteria for classifying the form of the Gospel tradition, and Räsänen never abandoned this classification in his books. One could even say that errors and inconsistencies, for Bultmann as well as Räsänen, are valid criteria when assessing, for instance, early Christology.

In practice, however, Räsänen can hardly have been said to take his criteria directly from medieval Quran criticism. Instead, the history of investigation follows a long and winding road which finally leads to the principles of form criticism—even though Bultmann does credit Strauss in the preface of his book on form criticism and, therefore, his path to Reimarus is quite short. But apart from these details it seems more evident that in fact it is the criterion of dissimilarity that really bears Reimarus' mark in Western scholarship.

Other direct connections have turned out to be rather vague. Even though Reimarus as a scholar is well known to Räsänen, to my knowledge he refers to Reimarus only once while discussing the relation of Quran criticism and the historical critical investigation of ancient texts. It can be found in one of his later collections, *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma*, but the weight here rests on Quran studies, not New Testament criticism. This is why this passage alone cannot be held as evidence for a connection between these scholars. One might wonder if it is at all possible to prove that Reimarus' ideas have anything to do with Räsänen's

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<sup>50</sup> Räsänen, *Das koranische Jesusbild*, 7–8.



own historical studies. There are other features in his writings, however, that lead the reader further.<sup>51</sup>

There is one Finnish article, namely, that opens to rather surprising views on Räsänen's use of Reimarus' principles. It is a popular article based on a paper read in a meeting concerning world views. In this article Räsänen reads the Bible as he would read any other literature and looks for detailed parallels between Quran studies and historical investigation of the Bible. He explicates criteria according to which both texts should be interpreted and also assesses their religious relevance in terms of such criteria.

Reimarus' original point of departure differs naturally from that of Räsänen. The latter never builds the same history of influence as the former. Therefore, in his article, Räsänen does not start with Riccoldo or Reimarus. Instead, he starts with contemporary scholarship and refers to an American scholar working in the science of religion. Already before Räsänen Wilfred Cantwell Smith had written a provocative essay on the subject: "Is the Quran the word of God?"<sup>52</sup>

When treating the issue, Räsänen is not content with traditional answers and is not certain that anyone could in principle justify any answer to Smith's question. Falsification might be easier and, in his own contribution, he starts to suggest detailed criteria according to which one would be able to falsify the basic statement "The Quran is divine revelation." If one could prove the Quran historically problematic and full of errors, it hardly could serve as God's word. In this respect, there must be precise criteria that could be used in this kind of investigation. The only problem with such a study, according to Räsänen, is that it simultaneously falsifies any claims that the Bible is divine revelation—should one apply the same criteria in the investigation of biblical writings.<sup>53</sup>

In the article, the details are striking. The criteria Räsänen presents closely resemble those used by Riccoldo and the ones he knows from Maracci's texts. Furthermore, they fall into precisely the same categories as in Reimarus' text two centuries earlier. He starts with three main issues: contradictions, errors and myths. The Quran is no doubt full of contradictions, Räsänen admits. His reasoning goes along the same lines as Reimarus' claims: "viel Ungereimtes, Widersprechendes, Fabelhaftes,

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<sup>51</sup> Räsänen, *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma*, 128.

<sup>52</sup> Räsänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 35.

<sup>53</sup> Räsänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 40–41.



ja Gottloses und Liederliches.” Furthermore, there are historical errors in the Quran. And like Reimarus before, Räisänen too is convinced that the Bible will likewise prove to be just a compilation of human stories about divine things. This is why both of these texts are full of descriptions of impossible events, myths and legends. When encountering such irrational features any scientific scholar should feel annoyed just by virtue of being a reasonable human being.<sup>54</sup>

The existence of these further criteria confirms that, in one way or another, traditional criteria have lived on in biblical criticism, regardless of the relation between Reimarus and Räisänen. The latter then moves on to the criticism of biblical morality.

If one then assumes that some moral views represented by the Quran (for instance polygamy or the idea of a holy war) prove that the book cannot be the utterance (or words) of God, it is even easier to find more problematic passages in the Old Testament.<sup>55</sup>

This is what Reimarus stated with intention: Immoral behavior is unacceptable, whatever the religion. Räisänen only develops this same criterium and applies it to certain contemporary problems. In addition to much violence, the Bible apparently also supports slavery and the oppression of women. Similarities between these scholars do not end here. Räisänen further comments on certain essential theological features.

Already Riccoldo claimed that the Quran contains false prophecy and speaks untruths about Christ. Reimarus developed this idea further by stating that there is no direct link between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Therefore most of the soteriological statements found in the Gospels have nothing to do with the reconstructed “historical Jesus.” Räisänen adopts similar views and says that the Old Testament does not present real prophecies about Christ: “Neither does the Old Testament originally refer to Jesus.” All connections between the Testaments are artificial and forced. They have been created later by Jesus’ followers who twist and distort their materials taken from Jewish Scriptures. According to Räisänen, the Old Testament knows only a political “messiah,” and the prophet Isaiah’s speech about the “suffering servant” was never meant to be a prophecy.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Räisänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 41.

<sup>55</sup> Räisänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 42.

<sup>56</sup> Räisänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 43.

What is interesting in Räsänen's reasoning is that he appears to be dependent on Augustine's principle of inerrancy. Following in the footsteps of both Riccoldo and Reimarus he implies that if the Bible does not prove to be clear and inerrant in everything that it says, it cannot be considered the word of God. One small lie will falsify the entire Bible. This is what Räsänen states in the beginning of his article, and almost in the same manner as his predecessors, as he assesses the role and task of scientific investigation.

Investigation can and it also must assess the consistency of arguments, or contradictions. And as far as the discussion involves historical-empirical arguments—people speaking for instance about the historical inerrancy of a book containing revelation—investigation naturally has both the right and a duty to assess their validity.<sup>57</sup>

These examples are perplexing in many respects. They show that certain criteria have lived on in scholarship, even though no one can prove that Räsänen used either Riccoldo's criteria or Reimarus' ideas when developing his hermeneutics. The similarities between these authors are so clear that one can claim at the very least that the attitude, if not the spirit, of the criteria has continued to influence biblical criticism through the centuries. As the investigation of the Quran has experienced a revival, so has the comparison between the Quran and the New Testament. Räsänen has a special role here since, already some forty years ago, he brought these issues back to biblical criticism. He has also revived the old demand: the Quran and the Bible must be assessed and interpreted by using same criteria. Therefore, even though Reimarus and Räsänen have approached the relationship between the Bible and the Quran from different angles, the outcome is identical.

Räsänen has written several articles on the Quran later in his career. One needs to understand that his criticism against the "polemical" nature of Christian medieval criticism was just meant as a comment on the attitude to and argumentation of the issue. It does not imply that he would support an approach that could be called an empathic or harmonizing reading of the Quran. Instead, Räsänen proposes a historical-critical reading of the book.

For instance in a 1984 article where he compares the Quran's view of Jesus to the New Testament, Räsänen states that historical study could help the dialogue between these two religions.

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<sup>57</sup> Räsänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 36.

One would like to claim that also in the case of the Quran one could carry out a demythologizing agenda, in other words the program of an existential interpretation of myths that, on the Christian side, has been applied to the New Testament.<sup>58</sup>

Räisänen is here confident that no development can be achieved unless people are ready to rethink their most important tradition: "In any case it is obvious that only a historical-critical assessment of one's own sacred tradition (on both sides) that delves deep can create conditions for a sound dialogue between Christians and Muslims." And he adds that, as far as Islam is concerned, only modest starts in this direction have been detected.<sup>59</sup>

In a 1990 article (reprinted 1993) called "Islam's vision" Räisänen further remarks that the mainstream interpretation of Islam is still conservative. It interprets the Quran literally and harmonizes the stories when needed. Islam itself defines what is to be considered natural or rational, since these must conform to the religion. One could say that Räisänen here sees the situation as similar to that of conservative Christianity where rationalist investigation of the Bible has not yet been accepted. In Islam there are some voices, though, says Räisänen, that are more modern: they attempt to "interpret the Quran more openly, in the light of reason."<sup>60</sup>

The main problem here lies in the fact that the Islamic world has not yet encountered the Enlightenment according to Räisänen. However, he is confident that the age of reason will finally change this religion too.

Contemporary Islam is in a completely different developmental stage than (Judaism and) Christianity: it has not yet entirely had to deal with Enlightenment thinking. Even though we would like to see the situation otherwise, the honors for decreased religious persecution in the West go mainly to the breakthrough of rational thinking and Enlightenment philosophy, despite many detractors' claims, particularly theologians.<sup>61</sup>

As an exception Räisänen presents professor Mohammed Arkouni from the Sorbonne, who wishes to find a new rational interpretation of the Quran. Arkouni finds common ground for a new dialogue from a new

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<sup>58</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 74. Reimarus, naturally, never mentioned demythologizing, but he too suggested that if the mythological stratum could be removed from the Quran, it could easily be shown to agree with the natural religion of Deism.

<sup>59</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 74.

<sup>60</sup> Räisänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 106.

<sup>61</sup> Räisänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 106. He also says that Islamic thinking is in a situation similar to that of Christian thinking several centuries ago. See p. 107.

concept of God: If we admit that God is just a mental representation produced by language, all religions will automatically be on the same level. No one can raise their religion above another. This means that Jews cannot claim to be “the chosen people,” Muslims cannot claim to have “the final revelation,” and Christians cannot be redeemed by a “God who has become a human being.”<sup>62</sup>

This is the final level on which Räsänen wants to see the historical understanding of religion—be it Christianity or Islam. Since the historical-critical scholar knows that there are no universal truths but merely occasional personal interpretations of experience, he can replace religion with humanism. Christians and Muslims could find a closer affinity should they follow suit. Since “no book can contain absolute revelation,” and there can be no certainty that “any God really acts in history,” this solution provides a way to adhere to Christian values and traditional religious feelings. Reimar was convinced that he could prove Islam a version of Deism, and Räsänen here wishes to make a similar identification by referring to Western humanism.<sup>63</sup> “If the theologies of monotheist religions are interpreted to existential-humanist standards they can all be seen essentially as expressions of one view.”<sup>64</sup>

Returning to the original issue we can see that Räsänen does apply some of the medieval criteria to both the Bible and the Quran. While he apparently wishes to keep his distance from Riccoldo’s and Marracci’s approaches, he nevertheless ends up using similar criteria in his own writing. This is why, in his comparison above, he speaks about the Quran’s errors, inner contradictions, and myths. His article would be incomprehensible would he not mean that these problems can also be found in the Bible.

Räsänen evidently assumes that a post-Enlightenment reading of any text in fact represents a rational and elegant reading that no longer has anything to do with medieval antagonism—as he states in his later articles. Therefore, he cannot imagine any reality where any reasonable person could read either the Bible or the Quran in any other way. Only this kind of attitude can explain why he simultaneously assumes that his criteria and reading differ from those of Riccoldo or Marracci. As a true scholar belonging to the historical-critical movement Räsänen is convinced that

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<sup>62</sup> Räsänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 107–108.

<sup>63</sup> Räsänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 108. The Reimar-like quotations are from Räsänen’s book.

<sup>64</sup> Räsänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 108.

any religious text, that is any human description of religious matters, is inevitably full of contradictions and errors. This explains why he recommends a historical-critical investigation of the Quran.

This, of course, is not yet the whole truth. One must also pay attention to the result of the comparison. When the Quran and the Bible are assessed by the same criteria, neither book turns out to be the inerrant word of God or divine revelation. Instead, they are what Reimarus called: “*Sammlung der alten fabularis historiae*.” When the Bible is read as general literature and assessed as any other ancient book must be assessed, it appears to be just a mixed collection of different and contradictory pieces of religious folklore. As an heir to German historicism, Räsänen naturally did not need Quran criticism for his conclusions. Instead one can say that this parallel just confirmed his assumptions about the nature of the New Testament. Furthermore, it helped the young scholar develop his criticism of the Bible’s divine authority, a theme to which we must soon turn.

#### 1.5. *Contribution to Contemporary Discussion I*

An analysis of particular periods in biblical criticism’s history cannot be realized without integrating contemporary scholarly discussion. Such an actualization serves two functions. First, we can discuss what kinds of consequences the analyzed views have had or may have in biblical studies today. Second, we can bring these older perspectives into the present situation and, when necessary, confront them with more contemporary views. Both of these aspects are needed since, after three centuries of scientific biblical investigation, philosophies, methods, and hermeneutical stances have changed essentially. No scholar is an island. Every author has his or her scholarly background and personal commitments, methodological premises and world views—not to mention the view of what science is basically about.

Starting with Reimarus, rationalist historicism, Deism, and an attack on *Supranaturalismus* come to the fore. Anyone agreeing with Reimarus’ views on the historical Jesus, or the criterion of dissimilarity, must consent to self-critical discussion on the problems of these principles. Should one take them for granted by not questioning their scientific value, one would be guilty of adopting and supporting the same premises that Reimarus subscribed to. Scholarly awareness here is important because epistemology no longer conforms to this particular kind of rationalism, Deism has gone completely out of fashion, and Gospel-studies on the historical Jesus have transformed more than at any time in the past two centuries.

The critical assessment of rationalist historical criticism in the West has been severe. One need only think about Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* from 1974 to remember that the discussion on biblical hermeneutics has distanced itself from the positions that were current in Reimarus' or Strauss' days. Both historical criticism and biblical hermeneutics have new commitments and so end up with completely different results. The yawning gap between rationalist theories and contemporary theories will be taken into account when assessing the older views in the present investigation.

In his analysis Frei noted that, already in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, biblical hermeneutics separated history and theology. "Literal and figural reading of the biblical narrative," as he says, "not only came apart," but "historical criticism and biblical theology were different enterprises and made for decidedly strained company."<sup>65</sup> History had become a faculty *sui generis*, and it dominated all biblical interpretation. Theologically, the biblical narrative was left in the shadows. Historical reconstruction became the "real" ground for theological construction.

This led to the odd situation described above. Some commentators explained the realistic feature by claiming that the stories are reliably or unreliably reported history. Others insisted that they are not, or only incidentally, history and that their real meaning is unconnected with historical reporting. In either case, history or else allegory or myth, the *meaning* of the stories was finally something different from the stories or depictions themselves, despite the fact that this is contrary to the character of a realistic story.<sup>66</sup>

Even though one can admit that Frei, too, in his Yalean narratology, was directed by a Barthian preunderstanding, which left room for Bultmannian kerygmatic theology, and failed to present a single exegesis—as he himself admits in his Preface—of any specific biblical passage, his critique on the history of investigation is accurate. It is not just that the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith were torn asunder. The new claim was any theology now had to be constructed in terms of demythologization. The ground of theology was segregated from the zealous mythology of the believers. "Real history" was the ideal according to which even Christian faith should be understood. This, of course, had been the idea in Deism's

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<sup>65</sup> Frei, *Eclipse*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> Frei, *Eclipse*, 11.

natural religion but German liberal theology adopted it as well. Biblical criticism became an apology for a materialist world view.<sup>67</sup>

The question about philosophical commitments in biblical scholarship is not an easy one, though. As historical overviews teach us, scholars from different periods taught in different contexts. Reimarus was indebted to Wolff, Strauss probably somewhat more to Hegel.<sup>68</sup> Later, idealist theologians followed Fichte and Carlyle, as did the famous Wilhem Bousset who wrote about Christ as a “cultic hero.”<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, the influence of the *Marburger Neukantianer*, Herrmann and his colleagues, was immense towards the end of the nineteenth century, as anyone reading von Harnack or the young Bultmann can attest to. This phase gave rise to the whole phenomenon of cultural Protestantism that encompasses one entire period of biblical criticism. And all this is just the preamble to other important developments. Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Derrida have influenced biblical interpretation in the twentieth century far more than the older philosophies have.<sup>70</sup> Why such an accumulation of successive philosophical trends? Facing this spectrum of views, we cannot accept the idea that just one current in historical investigation or scientific hermeneutics would be directed by such an illusory “academic” approach as Räisänen suggests.

It is necessary to discuss these different views to avoid the simplistic conclusion that, in the history of scientific research, historical criticism is the one well-grounded approach to ancient texts. Seen from today’s perspective, historical theories have been indebted to different philosophies, and this dynamic has consequently led to different readings of history. The same biblical passages and stories have received completely different interpretations depending on the theory that has been used. Furthermore, this has resulted in different constructions of the historical Jesus, not to mention Christology. What usually unites these readings is the eclipse of narrative. In most of these approaches the story itself has vanished. Theology has been constructed by searching for meaning behind the text itself.

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<sup>67</sup> This is noted for instance by Frei, *Eclipse*, 122, and Ruokanen, *Hermeneutica moderna*, 129.

<sup>68</sup> On Reimarus and Wolff, see Klein, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus*, 247–259. For Strauss and Hegel, see Berger, *Exegese und Philosophie*, 51–55. Such philosophical dependence will be discussed further in chapter 6.

<sup>69</sup> Berger, *Exegese und Philosophie*, 99.

<sup>70</sup> The influence of Heidegger and Wittgenstein will be discussed later in the chapters that treat issues related to their views.

If we take for granted that the nature of historical research has changed several times, this may alter the aim of the present investigation. Can we really explain Räisänen's views by referring to ideas developed in the nineteenth century? One might start to suspect the usefulness of the present analysis, had we not the example which Räisänen provides in his hermeneutical program. He openly subscribes to views and premises that were constructed decades and centuries ago. This demonstrates that critical methods have long-term effects, at least concerning premises and certain methodological choices. As Räisänen no doubt belongs to the German tradition—his early studies on the Gospels and on the Quran leave no room for hesitation here—he works with views that derive from early rationalism and Wolffian philosophy.

Awareness of such commitments is essential as one assesses, for instance, the relevance of the *fair play* argument that Räisänen developed in his Quran-studies. What does it mean to state that all religions must be approached and treated in a similar way? Should one today still define “religion” in terms of Wolffian rationalism, or use Deistic argumentation when assessing acceptable features of universal religion? This connection with early Quran-studies shows that Räisänen, as a young scholar, was unwittingly rooted in the earliest possible phase of historical study of the Bible. This is important as we remember that the guidelines for his biblical interpretation were constructed in this period. This is something that needs to be investigated in detail in the next chapter.

Räisänen is not the only scholar in this realm, however. For instance the Jesus-seminar in the U.S. with its publication *Five Gospels* gives credit both to Reimarus and Strauss.<sup>71</sup> There is a tradition in New Testament scholarship that accepts Reimarus' philosophical and theological approach and does not question its epistemological commitments. The crucial question in this situation goes as follows: is contemporary dialogue really possible when many views have changed, and some scholars have completely abandoned the premises and principles on which the Reimarian approach was grounded?

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<sup>71</sup> See Funk & Hoover, *The Five Gospels*, 2–3.



## CHAPTER TWO

### A PANORAMA OF NATURAL THEOLOGY: THE CHAIN OF INTERPRETATION

In the preceding chapter we noted that Räisänen is acquainted with Reimarus' legacy in many respects. His references to Quran criticism should probably be considered a coincidence, though, because Räisänen never claims that historical investigation of the Bible grew directly out this soil. Nevertheless, it is important to note that his interest in the same question eventually results in a historical-critical comparison of the Bible and the Quran. There are also other issues that connect Reimarus and Räisänen. The latter is indebted to the influential tradition of German historicism inaugurated by the former, and this lays the foundation for his most important hermeneutical idea, that of the chain of interpretation.

#### 2.1. *German Historicism and "Fair Play" in Historical Research*

Reading Räisänen's *Beyond New Testament Theology* reveals how he understands the genesis of proper scientific investigation of the Bible. He opens his treatment with the following sentence: "Modern exegesis of the Bible is rooted in Deism and the Enlightenment." As Adam notes, Räisänen's approach to biblical criticism belongs to the sphere of the modern. Räisänen places principal emphasis on the "historian's role in mediating legitimate interpretations of the literary evidence for theological reflection in ways that underline the distinction between ancient and modern, and the gap between past and present."<sup>1</sup>

Several details in Räisänen's career explain this point of departure. Already as a young scholar he largely adopted the views of German historicism. The Lutheran tradition in Scandinavia was indebted to Göttingen and Marburg, not to mention Berlin and Tübingen. The historical-critical investigation of the Bible, as it was generally called, was guided by the precepts of German scholars, following the paths for instance of Strauss and Weiss, and influenced essentially by Troeltsch and Harnack. Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 3. For the comments, see Adam, *Making Sense*, 101.

in the late 1960s and early 1970s Bultmannian influence was exhaustive also in Finland.

In his ground-breaking Finnish article “Raamatun auktoriteetista” [“On the Authority of the Bible,” only in Finnish, hereafter *Authority*], Räisänen suggests that simple scientific historical criticism will question the traditional view on the authority of the Bible in its essence. “The pressure of cumulative observations forces one to revise one’s concept of the Bible.”<sup>2</sup> In this article historical criticism is not seen merely as a method, but rather as a hermeneutical tool that has a sound epistemological basis. It can reveal the true nature of both Old and New Testament narratives. According to a “historical” assessment these stories are merely “Hebrew interpretations of faith”, as Räisänen says. Therefore, for him, the critical view on the Bible leads one to conclude ineluctably that all biblical statements about divine issues are but human interpretations. Such a reductionist view no doubt has its roots in the tradition of German historicism.<sup>3</sup>

Several passages in Räisänen’s early writings prove that he has accepted the popular Rankean concept according to which historical research is considered an art of investigating “facts.” This view has been promoted, as almost every student knows today, under the slogan: “wie es eigentlich gewesen” (“as it really happened”). Biblical scholars had understood the German tradition as a scholar collecting facts and drawing conclusions purely on the basis of factual reality. This is how a consistent picture of original events can be reconstructed through a thorough “exegesis.”<sup>4</sup>

For a more general approach to the Scriptures, the young Räisänen defines the work of biblical scholars in terms of inductive historicism. This can be seen in his definition of the investigative process.

Exegetical investigation does not build on any special philosophy (even though different exegetes [i.e. scholars] may express different philosophical-exegetical tendencies), but instead on *induction*. First, observations are gathered. On the basis of these, scholars then attempt to form a complete

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<sup>2</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 76. This important article will be introduced in detail below, see 2.2. As it has never been translated into English all translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> See Räisänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 77–79.

<sup>4</sup> See Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyksiä etsimässä*, 14. He uses the Rankean slogan in an empirical sense. The slogan appears already in the Introduction of *Die Mutter Jesu*, but here through a negation since the analysis did not concern the historical issue (p. 16). Note the terminology deriving from the German original: “exegetics” in Räisänen’s writings denotes biblical studies in general (German “Exegetik”), not merely a commentary style scrutiny of selected passages (i.e. “exegesis”, German “Exegese”). The department at the Faculty of Theology in Helsinki used to be called The Department of Exegetics.

picture about the object under investigation, and this is done by searching for as *natural* an interpretation of the observations as possible. The power of exegetics is precisely in the inductive work among details.<sup>5</sup>

This kind of view is usually called Rankean, even though such a description might not do justice to Leopold Ranke himself. Ranke is no doubt the father of German historicism ("Historismus"), and he promotes historical empirism, but the picture of his theory is not that simple. Ranke himself was also a theologian and, as any general introduction would note, in all his thinking he believed in divine providence. His explanation of human history was written in the Idealist tradition with a theological grounding. Ranke of course introduced the principle of objectivity and made it a methodological ideal in research. However, he also emphasized that a historian needs psychological astuteness in order to assess the human situation his sources depict. In this respect Ranke's famous slogan originally oriented towards a sympathetic understanding of human life behind the sources: life "as it really happened."<sup>6</sup>

As theologians applied the ideal of objectivity reductively in the tradition that scholars from Reimarus and Strauss to Wellhausen and Bousset had developed, historical empirism started to shift. The aim of study was no longer an empathetic understanding of the New Testament authors' writings, but a deciphering of the "real" historical course of events behind the propagandistic mythological texts. Theological historicism, thus, can be called Rankean as long as one remembers the difference between the original theory and its theological version.<sup>7</sup>

Räisänen, as we saw, states that historical study must be based on "induction." One must collect the facts and then give a reasonable explanation based on these facts. But what can be accepted as a fact in this case? Facts are naturally those essential features of the object that can be explained by *ratio*, reason. The empirical theory of history was developed the age of reason and rationalism, where reason alone was considered sufficient for

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<sup>5</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 12; [italics his or more often "italics original"]. On page 14 he refers directly to the Rankean principle. Scholars making historical investigation attempt to find out "what really happened." The same approach is evident in Räisänen's popular textbook for schools and colleges, written in 1978. Here he states simply: "The approach of the investigation is inductive: observations are gathered from the texts, and then one draws conclusions from the materials that have been gleaned." Räisänen—Saarinen, *Raamattutieto*, 179.

<sup>6</sup> See especially the entries on Ranke written by: Koehler, *RGG* 2. Aufl. IV (1930) 1699–1701; Kupisch, *RGG* 3. Aufl. V (1961) 778–779; Hardtwig, *TRE* XXVIII (1997) 133–138.

<sup>7</sup> For the changes in historical research, see Kummel, *Investigation*, 282, 310.

scientific judgment. There is an important distinction behind this remark. Facts were not simply seen as empirical observations but precise rational ways to observe the nature. Philosophical empiricism, which must be considered a somewhat different kind of theory, did not emphasize the role of reason to the same degree.<sup>8</sup>

The young Räisänen apparently demands the ideal of objectivity in his epistemology. He speaks of observations and induction in the manner of the natural sciences. One must first make observations and then attempt to find natural or suitable interpretations for them. If there is psychology involved, it must be able to explain why ancient people constructed myths. By “interpretations” Räisänen does not mean hermeneutical interpretations but explanations for the observations that have been made. In other words, they need to be applied to all other information that is known, as well as to the scientific world view that directs the investigation.<sup>9</sup>

In this standard inductionist approach, *facts* are considered the starting-point of inductive reasoning. Räisänen appears to assume that facts are something behind the manipulative texts themselves. Therefore, they must be found outside the sources and must be in disagreement with the written sources. This is expected because at that time, in the scholarly community, such inductive processes were considered quite unproblematic. Scientific problems do occur but they must be regarded as unavoidable difficulties that scholars face when dealing with different details. The basic idea of this philosophy of science is simple: pure observations produce pure scientific problems—and finally their solutions. Therefore, the inference that will be made on the basis of such facts is undoubtedly a logical and inevitable scientific inference.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The difference becomes crucial when we consider standard empiricism that speaks about the *tabula rasa* on which nature writes its information in pure observation. This question will be discussed in detail later, see especially 7.1. Induction, it should be admitted, as a word is used quite differently by various scholars today. Carson states that biblical theology should work “inductively from the text.” Carson, *BBR* 5 (1995) 29; but Carson can hardly be seen as a historicist. In Räisänen’s use the term has an epistemological function.

<sup>9</sup> Räisänen is well aware that many scholars accuse German historical criticism of relying on philosophical presuppositions. His answer is clear: “The claim that philosophical views affect exegetical investigation is greatly exaggerated.” Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 11. In this issue he takes the same position as Barr; see discussion below.

<sup>10</sup> Induction as such is a term used in logic. This kind of approach is therefore often called axiomatic, since it is related to the Aristotelian concept of inference. Observational facts are considered as axioms in the course of scientific inference. The conclusion is a theorem, a perfect explanation, that needs to be justified with facts that have this axiomatic nature.

Räisänen's view on the nature of the philosophy of science changes periodically, though. He is acquainted with the academic discussion of his time and, probably aware of Barr's examples, he is obliged to take the role of scientific hypotheses into consideration. This leads him to explain why historical critics do not end up with similar results even though they use the very same historical method.

Biblical criticism has to provide historical arguments. The reason that scholars, despite their point of departure, have contradictory results is partly in the piecemeal nature of the materials available (one is always left with wide gaps that one can bridge in different ways), and partly in the fact that scholars practicing historical exegesis are naturally affected by their personal preconditions, their reference group, and other subjective elements. Some people succeed in eliminating personal subjectivity better, some worse, and no one succeeds in it perfectly.<sup>11</sup>

If scientific knowledge is as well attested as Räisänen suggests, why do scholars end up with different and contradictory explanations? Räisänen answers like a true positivist. Firstly, he says that the evidence that we have is only fragmentary. Scholars have to fill in the blanks they find in the materials that they investigate, and this can naturally be done in several ways. Secondly, he admits that there are subjective elements in the investigation. Some scholars succeed in restricting their subjective intentions better than others.

The analysis thus far has shown that the young Räisänen is heir to the traditional inductivist epistemology that was widely accepted during the era of positivism in the European or Western scientific community in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He attempts to discuss some novel views on the philosophy of science, but he ends up writing an apology for empiricist historicism. This line of thought was known as the above-mentioned Rankean historicism, with its slogan on factual history. This is also how Räisänen saw the nature of the historical study of the Bible.<sup>12</sup> Reimarus' principles now received stronger epistemological justification: scholars reduced supernatural descriptions to expressions of human conduct.

The historical investigation of the Bible as a clearly defined approach was developed especially by Ernst Troeltsch, who introduced fixed criteria for historical explanation. Troeltsch was one of the most influential

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<sup>11</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> See especially Berger, *Exegese und Philosophie*, 57–60.

scholars of all time concerning the method and epistemology of historical research. He is convinced that the new era of science has completely changed our understanding of human existence and human thinking. Along with the new scientific world view, all our thinking has become historical (“diese Historisierung unseres ganzen Denkes”). In his philosophy of history the old crusade against supranaturalism, inaugurated by Strauss, reaches its climax. In Troeltsch’s epistemology there is no room for dogmata.<sup>13</sup>

According to Troeltsch, the “modern” view of history reorients our basic understanding of human history. Building on Enlightenment thought and its criticism of social institutions, it strives after the ideal of objectivity. “The naive world view has turned into a scientific one,” as he states.<sup>14</sup> This is the position from which Troeltsch then postulates his source criticism, focusing on a naturalist world view. According to Troeltsch, all biblical texts must be explained in accordance with the principles of analogy and causality. This, of course, resulted in a reductionist revision of biblical texts.<sup>15</sup>

What Troeltsch suggests in his reduction is a re-interpretation of every description and event that does not fit these principles. In this respect his historical criticism is still quite similar to that of the eighteenth century German rationalists. These scholars are more interested in miracle stories than essential questions of soteriology. One must admit, though, that their views affected their conceptions about soteriology as well.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>13</sup> Troeltsch, *Theologie als Wissenschaft*, 110. In my analysis on Troeltsch I build on the Finnish monograph *Hermeneutica moderna* by Miikka Ruokanen. In the manner of Hans Frei, Ruokanen disusses all major phases of New Testament hermeneutics in the modern era. Ruokanen, *Hermeneutica moderna*, 77. Troeltsch, one should note, belonged to the group that formed the history-of-religion school in Germany, see Reventlow, *History*, 336.

<sup>14</sup> Troeltsch, *Absolutheit*, 105. “Das naive Weltbild wandelt sich zum wissenschaftlichen.” Despite this obvious ideological stance it has been difficult for scholars to criticize Troeltsch’s historical method. For instance Balla seeks ways to supplement his principles but, nevertheless, basically accepts both the purpose and the means of the approach. Balla, *Challenges*, 14–16.

<sup>15</sup> Troeltsch, *Absolutheit*, 30–32, 38. Stuhlmacher remarks that such a view was possible only when Idealism had given rise to innocent cultural optimism in Europe. Stuhlmacher, *Hermeneutik*, 166–167. These criteria live on in contemporary scholarship, see for instance Harvey, *The Historian*, 14–15, and Collins, *Hebrew Bible*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Troeltsch, *Absolutheit*, 31. Adam notes that Räisänen—and Van Harvey—claim that New Testament interpreter is accountable to public standards, such as “tolerance” and “the morality of knowledge.” “One should not be surprised, then, to find that the standards to which their analyses appeal share the modern assumptions that mark the programmatic works of Gabler, Wrede, and Stendahl. Both Harvey’s and Räisänen’s books trade on the modern fixation on chronology, both stress the disciplinary divisions that distinguish

Troeltsch's criteria became the criteria of reality. They became hermeneutical tools. Analogy and causality are considered as criteria for finding out the truth of events. As a result, historical investigation became reductionistic. Explanation of the investigated objects had to conform to the laws of analogy and causality.<sup>17</sup>

Bultmann made these principles practical in his famous and much quoted article "Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?" His definition of the historical method is so straightforward that it has been often quoted by evangelical scholars, and it has also irritated the proponents of historical criticism like Barr who, in his *Fundamentalism*, says: "Bultmann was thus a godsend to conservative polemicists, for he exactly confirmed their [sic!] standard model of critical scholarship; and Bultmann is at one with the conservatives in failing to recognize what critical scholars have generally believed." Barr is not to be criticized. Bultmann just gives modern words to Troeltsch's theoretical principles, and no reader can miss his point.<sup>18</sup>

The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect [...] This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers and that therefore there is no "miracle" in this sense of the word. Such a miracle would be an event whose cause did not lie within history [...] It is in accordance with such a method as this that the science of history goes to work on all historical documents. And there cannot be any exceptions in the case of biblical texts if the latter are at all to be understood historically.<sup>19</sup>

There is an important difference between scholars from the beginning of the twentieth century on the one hand, and those from the end of the century on the other hand. Bultmann still welcomes Troeltsch's causalities in his historical criticism without hesitation. He actually continues Troeltsch's own approach since the latter already emphasized that theology should not fall into apologetic work when facing the historical reality

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historical interpretation from theological interpretation (and grant the former epistemological priority) [...] In other words, the way these theorists define their argument for the 'public accountability' of New Testament theology is thoroughly modern." Adam, *Making Sense*, 101. Cf. Harvey, *The Historian*, 112–117.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance Troeltsch, *Theologie als Wissenschaft*, 106–108.

<sup>18</sup> Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 237.

<sup>19</sup> Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, 345. I use here the abbreviation provided by Barr, see Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 235.



of academic investigation. Barr writes from a new perspective and is annoyed at the “conservative” criticism towards materialist “presuppositions.” Barr states that Bultmann’s views merely confirm conservative criticism of the historical-critical method. His emphasis appears to be more on the conservative reading than on Bultmann himself, even though the latter cannot escape Barr’s reprimand. Despite the fact that the view on history remains the same, Barr says that the historical method should not be applied only negatively: “The approach should not be expressed negatively as Bultmann does, when he says that it entails a denial of miracles and the supernatural.” This, of course does not mean that Barr would accept the reality of the supernatural, but he dislikes the position he is given in modern discussions about historical investigation.<sup>20</sup>

Räisänen has been quite open with his Rankean approach but he, too, detaches himself from Troeltsch’s principles. His comments follow the lines that Barr draw above.

Outsiders surely accuse exegetes of another thing: a positivist presupposition or some other similarly false “preunderstanding.” It should be clear, however, that none of us has started his or her exegetical work on the basis of Troeltsch’s four criteria, for instance. We did not roll up our sleeves and say to ourselves: “Let us start to investigate the Bible on the basis of skeptical criticism, the principle of analogy, the correlation of all historical events, and the principle of subjectivity, and see what we get!”<sup>21</sup>

Barr and Räisänen share the new concern that the principles of historicism have been questioned in recent academic discussion. Their defense is pragmatic: they accuse conservatives of using the outdated principles and methods as a weapon in an ideological struggle. This does not explain, however, why they should still cling to similar principles. As long as causality and analogy are held to be criteria of reality, as Räisänen does, it is useless to deny their applicability in New Testament studies. The essential problem here is, however, that in the theoretical discussion about methods for studying secular history such principles have never been very

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<sup>20</sup> Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 237. Troeltsch is well aware of the problems his position poses in discussions about *Supranaturalismus* and divine revelation in Germany. Troeltsch, *Theologie als Wissenschaft*, 106. He says that ecclesiastical apology is not the proper answer to scientific issues. In this sense he prepares way for Barr’s views.

<sup>21</sup> Räisänen’s defensive outburst is at odds with his positive, Rankean definitions of historical study. Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemystä etsimässä*, 133.



useful. These have always been criteria for theologians and methods for biblical scholars.<sup>22</sup>

There is evidence, though, that Räisänen goes beyond the traditional uses of the principle of analogy. In an article based on his lecture at the Finnish Society for Parapsychological Research, called “Raamatun ihmeet” [Miracles in the Bible], Räisänen discusses the principle of analogy from different points of view.<sup>23</sup> He does admit that historical criticism tends to treat miracle stories critically but this need not be the case in general. He starts his article by remarking that biblical scholarship as such does not have a “general” view concerning the reality of miracles. And a little later he continues: “No one doubts the fact that Jesus was a charismatic healer.”<sup>24</sup> This, of course, is not precisely in line with his statements elsewhere but it no doubt represents his view here.

The principle of analogy, however, then becomes crucial for Räisänen’s explanations. He continues with the story about the wedding at Cana. Some scholars have stated that this would be a supernatural event to which the principle “common in historical research”—as he says—namely the principle of analogy, cannot be applied. Räisänen denies the claim and comments that ancient world knew similar stories told about the Greek god Dionysus. According to one Dionysian story three empty jars were miraculously filled with wine during the night. This is the basis for a new adaptation of the principle: “Why should one not apply the principle of analogy also here?” Furthermore, Räisänen remarks that Jesus’ miracle remains without analogies “only if we *a priori* decide to believe it and not to believe those linked with Dionysus.” For Räisänen, this would be an arbitrary decision.

One is not justified in believing in biblical miracles but, at the same time, rejecting those miracle stories that are told about Asklepios, Serapis, Pythagoras, Buddha, etc. The principle of *fair play* demands that similar events in different contexts be treated first in a *similar* way—either sympathetically

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<sup>22</sup> Form criticism and redaction criticism, not to mention the criterion of dissimilarity, have never had any significant position in the study of profane history. In this respect, any theologian’s reference to the general scientific study of history has always been a mistake and even the title referring to “historical study” must be considered a misnomer.

<sup>23</sup> The article has been published several times. I refer here to the version with footnotes, Räisänen, *TAik* 93 (1988) 15–23.

<sup>24</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 93 (1988) 15; for the quotation, see p. 19.

or with suspicion. Only a detailed source criticism can then lead to different conclusions—in one direction or the other.<sup>25</sup>

*Fair play*, as defined here, becomes a key term for Räisänen, and he later uses it whenever he drifts into conflict when discussing the theological or supernatural nature of the New Testament. The principle of analogy is in fact the justification of his quite materialist view. As his opponents hardly ever accept the reality of Pythagoras' miracles, for instance, there is no fair way to argue for the reality of Jesus' miracles either. This, of course, demands that all religions be treated in a similar "science-of-religion" manner. No priorization is allowed if one wishes to be counted among scientific scholars. What Räisänen does not discuss here is the alternative: that ancient stories may be regarded as stories written by people who have experienced miracles—and leave the assessment of their reality to the realm of personal conviction.

For Räisänen, however, the principle of fair play has an even broader justification. This is a principle that he constructed on the basis of his Quran-studies. If one is to investigate both the Bible and the Quran in a similar way, no prioritizing can be made in religious matters.

The study on different images of God revealed for me how normal it is in scholarly work to "act for one's own benefit" against the rules of fair play. When Allah makes people go astray he is depicted as an arbitrary despot; when Jahweh hardens the heart of whomever he chooses, it reflects his majestic holiness.<sup>26</sup>

Even though Jesus, for Räisänen, is a charismatic healer, he considers most Gospel stories describing miracles unhistorical. Based on his historical-critical investigation Räisänen has many reservations. Source criticism makes him doubt most claims beyond certain healings and exorcisms. His reserve here is based on three different issues: (1) world views have changed, since attitudes towards miracles in ancient times were different; (2) New Testament miracle stories, according to his analysis, are not based on eyewitness accounts; (3) the earliest layer of Gospel tradition reflect the teaching of the historical Jesus.<sup>27</sup> Räisänen summarizes his

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<sup>25</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 93 (1988) 17. He also refers to the history-of-religions theory about the Hellenistic "divine man" in this context. Apollonios is an important parallel in Räisänen's thought despite the fact that, already in 1988, several studies had been published about the invalidity of the theory; see p. 22. About the discussion itself, see Koskenniemi, *Apollonios*, 14–15.

<sup>26</sup> Räisänen, *Vartija* 2 (2006) 87.

<sup>27</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 93 (1988) 20.

article by listing miracle stories that cannot be held to be historical. They comprise walking on water, turning water into wine, raising the dead, and feeding thousands of followers. According to Räisänen, these stories exaggerate Jesus' significance and "sell" his mission in the ancient environment. "This is a kind of religious advertising campaign—with a sincere purpose, but apparently in tension with Jesus' own purposes."<sup>28</sup>

According to this article one can say that the principle of analogy has a central position in Räisänen's theory. Since he applies it, in theory, to other religions, he never concludes that a real supernatural miracle would be possible. He does admit that Jesus appeared to be a charismatic healer, but only in stories that can be explained by psychological changes in the healed person's life. Medically provable miracles exceed the scope of his reasoning. In this respect Räisänen writes like the eighteenth century rationalists who present Jesus as a kind of shamanistic healer who is able to manipulate people and is acquainted with herbal medicines. Later, under the influence of Bultmann, *Entmythologisierung* becomes the key word in exegesis that summarizes the basic tendency. The Bible is considered as a compilation of myths that must be winnowed before the "meaning" of the Scriptures can be reached. Räisänen accepts de-mythologization in his historicism even though he does not accept all of Bultmann's hermeneutical tools.<sup>29</sup>

Historicism, meaning a belief that history develops necessarily according to certain rules towards a determinate end, has not been very popular since the Second World War.<sup>30</sup> The Scandinavian Ottar Dahl, to take one example, criticizes determinist ideas harshly in his monograph on the method of historical investigation. According to Dahl, history, like any other discipline, works with hypotheses that must be tested and occasionally eliminated. Scientific problems are constructed inside the theory and in the context that makes them reasonable. Therefore, historical investigation, cannot be regarded merely as a deciphering of causalities buried behind the evidence. Instead, we must speak of research programs where the posing of problems depended on the premises of the program itself.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 93 (1988) 22.

<sup>29</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Bultmann's ideas, see subchapter 6.3.

<sup>30</sup> Popper's *Poverty of Historicism* was in fact written against the determinist understanding of history and the society that had produced totalitarian ideologies. The understanding of history, thus, had been part of European cultural history in a very negative sense. Popper, *Poverty*, ix, 112–117, 143–151.

<sup>31</sup> Dahl, *Historiantutkimuksen metodipin peruspiirteitä*, 10, 17, 24–26. Dahl discusses the meta-theoretical principles in historical study. The translation of this book was published

Such a rejection of historicism was also known in Finnish academic discussions in the late 1960s. It is interesting that Räisänen, at least to some degree, had to take it into account in his writings. In certain passages Räisänen admits that historical investigation cannot achieve perfect results. In spite of his premises presented above, he does also speak of hypotheses. He ponders further why different scholars draw different conclusions, even though they apply one and the same scientific method.<sup>32</sup>

For instance in an article on Gospel criticism he discusses the results of redaction criticism. According to Räisänen, the analysis of redaction criticism produces hypotheses about its object, and scholars can assume that many of these hypotheses are rather trustworthy. The analysis itself, however, is always based on a reconstruction of alleged phases behind the extant text. Therefore, redaction criticism's suggestions must be left open to discussion in the scientific community.

On the level of redaction history one can make hypotheses whose grade of plausibility is clearly higher than hypotheses made in the sphere of tradition history or history in general. [...] Different hypotheses compete with each other in a legitimate way, as long as there is exegetical investigation.<sup>33</sup>

Räisänen focuses on the question of the probability of different explanations. Due to his background in historicism, Räisänen tends to hold the explanations of redaction criticism as rather trustworthy. For him, history is still a matter of detecting facts and making inductive inferences. Since Troeltsch has introduced the criteria for historical research, the results of an openminded, critical investigation should not be doubted. The basic problem with Räisänen's speculations over the theory of historical study is that he never draws the conclusions that the new theory would demand. Instead, he attempts to accommodate a few new ideas in his standard historicism and often ends up with an apology for the old view. This is in line with the fact that the historical investigation, and its theory in particular, developed in two completely different currents. We shall return to the problems of history writing later in 2.5.

Räisänen, Barr, and Funk with his Jesus-seminar continue to support the old paradigm of historical study. Their explanations still rely on the criterion of dissimilarity. They still discuss the principles that Troeltsch

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in Finnish in 1971, the very same year Räisänen's first monograph on the Quran was published.

<sup>32</sup> See examples above and Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 13–14.

<sup>33</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 37.

introduced, despite the fact that they want to belittle their significance. What is missing, however, is the rejection of the old principles and the adoption of new ones. This “liberal” reading of history has always contested *Supranaturalismus*, and this feature is typical of Räsänen’s work even in his last books. Therefore, it is not clear what Räsänen means when he states that he wishes to represent a particularly “historical” study of the New Testament. His views no longer correspond with recent theories of historical investigation.

Some practical examples will make the above-mentioned conclusion understandable. Räsänen is often quite optimistic about the conclusions of historical-critical reasoning. For instance, by quoting Barr he states that, in historical investigation, “a high degree of objectivity” can be attained. Räsänen admits that there are different ways to assess the data, but he is quite confident that open-minded historical scholarship can solve the minor disagreements that are left in any study. So he remains a historicist and does not accept the Popperian or Kuhnian discussion over the paradigmatic nature of scientific research. For Räsänen, the empirical reality will always prevail.

Yet it should be clear, after the discussions in hermeneutics and the philosophy of science this century, that the person of the scholar cannot be wholly bracketed out in historical work. The scholar’s perception is influenced by his or her own situation and interests. An actualizing concern always exists, consciously or unconsciously. But the concerns of the reader can be kept under control within certain limits. “It is true that complete objectivity is not attainable, but a high degree of objectivity is attainable, and a high degree of it is much better than a low degree.”<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, when miracles are investigated Räsänen remains more cautious. He accepts the idea that Jesus was an exorcist and that in his charismatic movement people may have experienced healing. He does not demand that all Gospel narratives that describe a miraculous event be given a materialistic explanation in the manner of Strauss.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See Räsänen, *Beyond*, 106. Barr presented his ideas in *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, 24. One should note, however, that Barr is often more theological than Räsänen. A little later the former continues: “The idea, then, that objectivity in biblical study can be attained through the exclusion of theological interest should not be accepted; and, as theologians have often and rightly pointed out, where theological interest has been excluded it has often been only to make room for some secular or pseudo-theological ideology which is equally destructive of objectivity.”

<sup>35</sup> Räsänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 13–14.

The question of miracles in biblical studies is much more trivial than one might conclude on the basis of ultra-conservative literature. Biblical studies as a discipline, of course, does not have any *a priori* view on miracles. The conceptions of individual scholars vary significantly. Very few scholars deny the possibility of miracles *a priori*.<sup>36</sup>

Such examples show that Räisänen is well aware of the theoretical discussion that has been going on after the Second World War. In his own contemplations he remains somewhat ambivalent, though. When facing the lively discussion of the scientific community, he admits that hypotheses made during investigations need to be treated as hypotheses. They must remain open for later discussions. They are not to be held as axiomatic knowledge produced by inductive work, free of presuppositions. But when Räisänen explains the reasons for such multiplicity and diversity in scientific investigation, he states somewhat unexpectedly that such vagueness is because some scholars cannot keep their subjective intentions under control.

Therefore, one must conclude that Räisänen is more indebted to historicism than he wants to admit. He never says that vagueness of scientific research concerns epistemology. Räisänen seems to believe that if the conditions of the investigation are good and evidence sufficient, the results of the investigation will always be true. This is especially so regarding supernatural descriptions or theological diversity in the post-Easter community, no matter what he says about miracles in theory.

Furthermore, this is apparently the reason why Räisänen, at the end of his *Miten ymmärrän raamattua oikein* [*How to Understand the Bible Correctly*], boldly defines the principles of acceptable research. Räisänen states that proper biblical scholarship is the only scientific approach that can be “taken seriously” in both in the scientific community and in the Church. According to Räisänen there are some necessary preconditions that must be taken into consideration:

Traditional views about the authors of individual books of the Bible, as well as their time of birth, have been rejected. One needs to admit further that the Bible also contains unhistorical material and that there is no inner unity in the Bible.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyksiä etsimässä*, 13.

<sup>37</sup> Räisänen, *Miten ymmärrän raamattua oikein*, 120. This book will be introduced more thoroughly in the next subchapter.

The historical-critical method is important for Räisänen. The term itself, of course, has been a catchword in the spheres of scientific biblical investigation despite the fact that the “method’s” precise content has always been nebulous. Räisänen uses the term quite freely, and it is almost a symbol for a decent and rational understanding of the New Testament. Räisänen says this explicitly in one of his earlier books.

No biblical criticism other than the historical-critical can be taken seriously. It does not even exist. My book has been written in order to prove this statement.<sup>38</sup>

The book in question is the abovementioned *Miten ymmärrän raamattua oikein*, a monograph inspired by James Barr’s famous *Fundamentalism* (from 1977). The tone of Räisänen’s book is contrary, challenging, and sharp.<sup>39</sup> He accuses both the clergy of the Finnish Lutheran Church and the so-called evangelicals—in the Finnish context this refers mainly to the representatives of Lutheran revival movements—of conservatism. They have opposed the historical study of the Bible for generations. However, for Räisänen there is no alternative. The time of the “fundamentalists” is over.

It is true that Räisänen, at least elsewhere, also admits that scholars disagree on this basic issue. There is no consensus about the *unhistorical* nature of the writings among different authors. Despite this, according to Räisänen, the “methodological point of departure is undisputable.” This statement confirms our suggestion that the way Räisänen understands the historical “method” is dependent on German historicism. It is actually the scientific world view and empirical epistemology that dictate the nature of the so-called historical approach, as well as the reductionistic treatment of Gospel narratives in particular.<sup>40</sup>

All this is highly significant for Räisänen’s hermeneutical views. In the sphere of inductivism, interpretation was usually considered just a

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<sup>38</sup> Räisänen, *Miten ymmärrän raamattua oikein*, 11. Barr, in turn, does not make such premises explicit but they are implied in the description of the characteristics of fundamentalism: “a strong hostility to modern theology and to the methods, results and implications of modern critical study of the Bible.” Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> The setting in Barr’s *Fundamentalism* is quite similar. Barr also deals extensively with anti-evolutionary ideas and the principle of inerrancy, and only partly treats particular exegetical issues. But Räisänen also writes about these subjects. See for instance Barr, *Fundamentalism*, xii–xv. In his own text Räisänen says that his book “would probably not have been written” at all had there not been Barr’s sharp analysis from which Räisänen “has learned much.” Räisänen, *Miten ymmärrän raamattua oikein*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> Räisänen, *Miten ymmärrän raamattua oikein*, 120–121.



homiletical application of biblical texts. It was understood as a matter of personal signification and even taste. Interpretation was strictly separated from pure historical investigation because, in the empiricist tradition, reality itself was considered the direct source of knowledge. Both the texts and their alleged problems were understood as indisputable. As the examples from Räisänen's writings show, epistemology at that time had very little to do with hermeneutics.<sup>41</sup> Räisänen has naturally had to answer later criticism towards such positivistic inductivism and, as we saw above, his solutions point to the incompetence of (some) scholars or the insufficient material or equipment. Nevertheless, he has always held that it is possible to attain "a high degree of objectivity" through demythologizing, source criticism, and redaction criticism.

Hermeneutics, in the inductivist tradition, was thus considered a stage that should come only after the historical analysis. Historical *explanation* was separated from theological or ideological *interpretation*, and this is Räisänen's view.<sup>42</sup> Such a background explains why Räisänen puts hermeneutical readings in direct relation to historical-critical study. He speaks of three phases. Earlier fundamentalist theories oppose historical criticism, but mediating views attempt to take its results into account. The final alternative accommodates interpretation completely according to historical-critical study.<sup>43</sup>

According to Räisänen's view, the main approaches to the Bible are: fundamentalist, salvation historical, and non-literary (historical-critical). Scientific investigation renders the old literal view untenable.<sup>44</sup> Some scholars have attempted to solve theological problems by concentrating on a more general salvation historical interpretation: the Bible may be wrong in details, but it is correct in the proclamation of salvation. According to Räisänen, the salvation historical interpretation builds on historical investigation. It just focuses on the uniting themes: "God's actions for the

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<sup>41</sup> "The human being is an empirical animal." This rhetorical statement represents his point of departure well. It was said in an interesting context, though. In his article, Räisänen discusses the problems empiricism faces, such as Berger's sociology of knowledge. Räisänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 22. We shall discuss later how Räisänen succeeds in dealing with phenomenological theories that emphasize the role of the mind in epistemology. It is not easy for him because his very point of departure is inductive.

<sup>42</sup> This is the basic dichotomy presented in Räisänen, *Raamattutieto*, 179.

<sup>43</sup> There has been much speculation on such a dichotomy, see discussion later in 6.1.

<sup>44</sup> See the treatment of the trichotomy in the introduction. The change Räisänen refers to has very personal features: "The indisputable observations that destroy the fundamentalist view often drive the student into a crisis." Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyksiä etsimässä*, 144.



salvation of humankind.” The historical reality, however, differs from the fundamentalist reading. “Emphasis is on the main themes that direct the thought, but in smaller issues scholars may present more liberal views.”<sup>45</sup>

In some of his earlier writings Räisänen says that, once the historical investigation of the Bible has been accepted, there are two different ways to build on its results. The first one is the salvation historical interpretation described above, and the other is an existentialist interpretation.

One can build different theologies on the common ground historical criticism. These concern the main issue of theological discussion [...] One can refer here to “salvation historical” and “existentialist” theology. A critical discussion between these two has governed theological forums for a long time.<sup>46</sup>

In the *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä* Räisänen then presents an interesting introspective account of his own development as a scholar. He says that he, like any young student of theology, started with a literal view on the Bible. As the results of historical-critical investigation began to prove the fundamentalist view untenable, he adopted a salvation historical interpretation. This did not last long, though. In the course of time new questions arose. “Gradually I found myself once more going in a new direction. For want of anything better one can call this ‘non-literal’ interpretation.”<sup>47</sup>

For Räisänen, historical investigation became inescapable. If one is to interpret New Testament theology, this must be done entirely in terms of historical-critical analysis. Scientific investigation first reveals the real historical situation in which the texts have been compiled and constructed. After that, interpretation will attempt to understand what kind of religion or religious ideology these texts represent. For Räisänen, historical-critical reading of the texts is in fact a real hermeneutical approach that is better than the two aforementioned ones.<sup>48</sup>

There are certain points in which Räisänen differs from other interpreters of the New Testament. For Räisänen, salvation history is no longer the

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<sup>45</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattutieto*, 184–185.

<sup>46</sup> Räisänen, *Miten ymmärrän*, 121.

<sup>47</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 147.

<sup>48</sup> Räisänen remarks that these approaches have also criticized each other. Representatives of the salvation historical interpretation claim that existentialist path with its demythologizing turns Christian faith into mere ethics. Existentialists, in turn, claim that salvation historical interpretation loads an impossible burden on modern human beings: “the world view of ancient society.” Räisänen, *Raamattutieto*, 188.

hermeneutical model of the New Testament authors. Cullmann, who is responsible for the term, suggests that especially Luke but also Paul interpret Israel's history and Old Testament prophecies in this way. Cullmann's explanation is then a result of *historical* study, not *hermeneutical* analysis in the sense Räsänen defines the term. Räsänen turns this pattern around. The new interpretation is held to be a hermeneutical reading that imposes "salvation historical" ideas on the texts in order to solve some of the problems historical study has raised.<sup>49</sup>

Biblical interpretation, for Räsänen, thus means an ideological and theological treatment of the results historical-critical investigation provides. In this respect his "non-literal" interpretation is a reductionist view: there is nothing "literal" in New Testament texts themselves. Räsänen speaks of "facts" that the interpreter must take into account. Interpretation therefore is a theory of application and appropriation. Its material comes through scientific investigation. The Bible is filled with contradictory ideas, fragmentary material, and non-historical inventions that have been put together in the midst of violent power struggles in the early church. Interpretation is something that tries to make sense of all these processes and to do justice to different expressions of religious experience.

The only surprising thing here is that, as a young scholar, Räsänen constantly calls the third phase—and third alternative in his triad—an existentialist interpretation. For Räsänen, the best example of non-literal interpretation is Bultmann's hermeneutical theory.<sup>50</sup> Both demand a conscious reinterpretation of the biblical message. The content must be translated into modern concepts. The old literary view simply prevents modern people from hearing what the Bible wishes to say.<sup>51</sup> Such a sympathetic reading of Bultmann's hermeneutics is destined to create problems in Räsänen's later developments of interpretation theory. He neither subscribes to the principles of Heidegger's philosophy nor accepts metaphysical categories in epistemology. These problems will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

The principles of analogy and causality are crucial for Räsänen's historical research. As a young scholar he clearly followed Troeltsch's historicism. His works on the Quran and the Bible are based mainly on principles from that tradition. Räsänen's original use of the principle of analogy also

<sup>49</sup> Räsänen refers to Cullmann's influential text on salvation history.

<sup>50</sup> Räsänen, *Raamattutieto*, 183, 188; *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 149: "The most famous one to 'translate' biblical ideas to modern concepts is Rudolf Bultmann."

<sup>51</sup> Räsänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 149–150.

allows him to present the “fair play” argument. Since New Testament scholarship is a matter of science of religion and builds on sociology, all “similar” events in all possible contexts must be treated in a similar way. If one admits the real possibility of Jesus’ miracles, one must have the very same attitude towards Asklepios’ or Buddha’s assumed miracles. Beyond this, only source criticism can question the value of the stories that describe these events. Räsänen remains a materialist, though. In his writings he uses the principle of fair play negatively: he believes neither in the reality of Jesus’ nor Buddha’s miracles. He uses Rankean theory when explaining history and is well acquainted with Troeltsch’s principles, which he never questions. These points of departure are significant for Räsänen’s hermeneutical reading of the New Testament. His hermeneutics are typically historical critical. Räsänen rejects both the fundamentalist, literal approach and salvation historical interpretation. For him, the only possible and plausible line of interpretation is non-literal.

In summary we can say that, for Räsänen, the historical-critical methodology is important in many ways. In his writings he refers to the canon of the methodology and appreciates it. But when he speaks of historical-critical investigation, he does not mean the historical-critical method alone. His approach must be seen in a wider context. To use a recent term it is a reading. It is a kind of historical attitude. Räsänen states that one must try to present natural explanations for the inductive problems he or she faces. All this is important when Räsänen’s own hermeneutical theory is appraised. There are several crucial questions to be asked. Is the historical-critical method the basic point of departure or justification for Räsänen’s hermeneutical theory of the chain of interpretation? The answer to this first question is negative. Literary criticism or redaction criticism have almost nothing to do with the premises of Räsänen’s hermeneutical theory. It is precisely the general “historical” attitude that justifies his criticism against “the authority of the Bible,” as one of his articles states.

Secondly, we must ask: Is the methodological canon the basis on which Räsänen constructs his criticism of Paul’s theology in his influential book *Paul and Law*? Once again the answer is negative. Räsänen uses none of the particular methods in his Pauline studies. This is understandable because the actual methodology has almost nothing to do with Pauline writings. Therefore, Räsänen’s historical study on Paul rests on some other premises of the historical approach—and these premises cannot be found in books discussing historical-critical methodology.

And finally, we need to ask the essential question as regards both *Beyond New Testament Theology* and his work on the New Testament era

history-of-religion, the *Rise*: Does the historical-critical method justify Räsänen's history-of-religion approach to the theology of the New Testament in the manner of Wrede? Even here the answer remains ambiguous. Räsänen undoubtedly exploits redaction criticism, for instance, in his treatment of Gospel material in this study. As regards the assessment of theology or the great diversity in tradition Räsänen attempts to detect, traditional methods are useless. They treat only theories about the compilation of Gospel material. This reveals that Räsänen's writing is mainly directed by his hermeneutical view and by his conception of the diversity of early Christian thinking.

The analysis made in this subchapter confirms the conclusion that Räsänen's theological hermeneutics, which heavily affect his assessment of the history of "early Christian religion," is not directly dependent on the historical-critical method as it is generally presented in books on biblical criticism. Instead, Räsänen has rather adopted a more general view on the historical nature of biblical texts. This view is usually based on the same kind of historicism that he defined in his early article *On the Authority of the Bible*. Therefore, it is time to focus on issues that really influence Räsänen's hermeneutical theory.

## 2.2. *Laying the Foundation: On the Authority of the Bible*

If the historical-critical method treats the Bible like common literature, how should one consider the theological statements of the Scriptures? Räsänen's answer in part follows the lines of the general tradition of German liberalism. The biblical message should be evaluated by reason alone. Räsänen did however find inspiration for this kind of thought elsewhere. His affinity with American liberalism completes the picture we get from his early writings. In his theology, these kinds of ideas lead finally to a well-defined concept of the method of interpretation.

In the investigation of Räsänen's hermeneutics, his abovementioned article "Raamatun auktoriteetista" ["On the Authority of the Bible;" hereafter: *Authority*] from 1972 plays a central role. It has been written in the same period as his analyses of the Quran. This writing is not merely to be seen as a comment on an ongoing Finnish discussion over the debated question of authority. In this article Räsänen introduces his interpretation of the concept of natural theology—and even more precisely than for instance in *The Idea of Divine Hardening*. In this respect, this rather early

writing presents some essential premises that affect Räsänen's thinking even to the present day.<sup>52</sup>

According to Räsänen, investigations made with the help of historical-critical study have altered our view of the Bible completely. He states that both the explanation and interpretation of early Church history must change, and the highly negative, critical voices of modern scholarship must be heard. There is no longer evidence for a consistent picture of New Testament theology. On the contrary, scientific study has revealed a formidable diversity of theological conceptions in the Scriptures. Räsänen opens his *Authority* as follows:

Most Christian laymen still today seem to have a conception of the Bible that is as unproblematic as before. The Bible is an inspired book that God produced or even dictated in a special way. Divine inspiration gives the Bible infallible authority. As the word of God, it is practically inerrant, that is, at least in all religious questions. [...]

Nevertheless, while doing biblical studies, some people do drift into an inner process. The pressure of cumulative observations forces one to revise one's concept of the Bible constantly. When the initial battle has been fought, it appears to be a relief to give up the idea of verbal inspiration. The Bible begins to live in a new way. [...]

It is crucial, however, to ask: what will happen later? What happens when theologians increasingly assess their view of the Bible in the light of exegetical observations and their own experience? Can the salvation history view speaking about God's great works be sufficient for an open mind? My answer is: no.<sup>53</sup>

After his opening lines Räsänen starts to present examples of issues and passages that have lost either their historical relevance or theological meaning. His hermeneutical point of departure resembles the one familiar from Reimarus' writings. Belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible is dependent on the Augustinian principle of infallibility. If the Scriptures do not prove to be the inerrant Word of God almost in "dictated" form, the belief in divine authority is in danger. Hence the question: what will happen later?

This kind of view was no novelty at that time in Protestant Europe, naturally. The views of doctrinal Christianity were questioned especially

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<sup>52</sup> See Räsänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 76. The footnote identification will be made according to bibliographical information.

<sup>53</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 76–77.

in the sphere of biblical studies. Should we start with the German tradition, Räisänen often refers to the statements of Ernst Käsemann in the latter's epoch-making article "Begründet der neutestamentliche Kanon die Einheit der Kirche?" from 1964 ["Is the New Testament Canon the Basis for the Unity of the Church?"]. This was originally a paper read at an ecumenical conference in 1951. Käsemann's ideas sprang from a source well-known at that time. His teacher Rudolf Bultmann was preparing his monumental *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* for publication, and the commonly acknowledged results of critical study, for Käsemann, were the results of the Bultmannian school.<sup>54</sup>

There are allusions to Käsemann's text in Räisänen's *Authority*, but for some reason he does not refer to it in his article directly. Later, however, Räisänen has used Käsemann's article extensively—and in a somewhat similar context in which the original paper was read. In a conference where the relationship between scientific investigation of the Bible and Church's faith was discussed, Räisänen presented a paper that relied heavily on Käsemann. Räisänen published the main corpus of his speech with some new comments in his Finnish article "Katedraali vai kiviraunio? UT: n pluralismista ja yhtenäisyydestä." [A Cathedral or a Mound of Stones: On the Pluralism and Unity of the New Testament, 1986]. Right in the beginning of the article he presents a summary of Käsemann's ideas expressed in the abovementioned text.

Ernst Käsemann threw a bomb at the audience of an ecumenical conference in the form of a thesis that later became famous: The canon of the New Testament does not provide a basis for the unity of the Church, but rather for the diversity of denominations. He referred (1) to the diverse theological and dogmatic views of the gospels' writers; (2) to the fragmentary nature of the canon, suggesting that "the plurality of early Christian kerygma must have been even greater" than what we see in the preserved documents; (3) to misunderstandings by the congregation; (4) to dogmatic oppositions that collide in severe ways: (a) Paul's and James' teachings on justification cannot be theologically reconciled; (b) the Acts describe Paul's apostolate in a manner which Paul himself rejects in an utterly clear manner; (c) the eschatological views of the Gospel of John and Revelation cannot be harmonized. In

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<sup>54</sup> Bultmann's *Theologie* was actually first published as separate booklets during 1948–1953. See O. Merk's notes in the *Preface* of the 7th edition. Käsemann's article has later been translated into English and published in his collection *Essays on New Testament Themes* under the title "The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church." See Käsemann, *Essays*, 95; for the present issues, see especially pp. 96–98.

summary, many theological positions in the early Church are at least partly of such a nature that they *cannot* be joined together.<sup>55</sup>

In a footnote a little later, Räisänen refers to Bultmann who, in his programmatic article on the idea of *Entmythologisierung* (also in English: “New Testament and Mythology”; see *Kerygma and Myth*), states that several theological views found in the New Testament contradict each other. This fact, therefore, demands that the interpreter adopt a skeptical attitude towards the mythological conceptions of the text.<sup>56</sup> It seems obvious that Räisänen both accepts and adopts the statements of Bultmann and Käsemann. For him they represent the scientific approach and true knowledge about the Bible. Therefore Räisänen, also in his early article on the authority of the Bible, states that all the contradictions and historical problems scientific study reveals make the traditional view of the Scriptures untenable.

One might assume that Räisänen, as a Lutheran scholar, would build exclusively on German historical criticism. This, however, is not true. It is somewhat surprising to note that Räisänen, in his *Authority*, actually quotes two American scholars. He starts his article with an extensive discussion with the liberal Vanderbilt professor Langdon B. Gilkey and completes his text by quoting the independent universalist and famous JBL editor, professor Morton S. Enslin.

Following Gilkey, Räisänen writes in *Authority* that “the pressure of cumulative observations forces one to revise one’s concept of the Bible constantly.” Problems abound. Gilkey no longer believes “literally” in Old Testament stories like Abraham and Sarah, angelic visitations, or the plagues of Egypt. Therefore, he is in accord with Räisänen’s position. And as one can see in one of Räisänen’s quotations, Gilkey rejects the possibility of miracles: “Most of the acts recorded in Scripture turn out to

<sup>55</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 91 (1986) 193–194. This text too exists only in Finnish.

<sup>56</sup> Räisänen also presents a summary of Bultmann’s ideas in the abovementioned text and lists some contradictory themes: “(1) Christ’s death is interpreted as (a) a sacrifice, (b) a cosmic event; (2) His person is depicted as a person of (a) a Messiah, (b) of the second Adam; (3) There is a contradiction between the idea of (a) kenosis and (b) the stories about Messianic miracles; (4) The teachings about (a) virgin conception and (b) pre-existence are contradictory; (5) (a) The belief in creation is in disagreement with teachings about (b) the powers of this world, “the god of this world”, and the elemental spirits of the universe; (6) The law comes either (a) from God or (b) just from the angels; (7) Above all “a special contradiction, common to all New Testament writings” demands a critique of mythology: on the one hand human beings face an unavoidable fate (*kosmische Determiniertheit*), on the other hand they are called to make a decision.” Räisänen *TAik* 91 (1986) 193, fn. 3.



be 'interpretations by Hebrew faith,' and we are sure that they, like the miracles of the Buddha, did not really happen at all."<sup>57</sup>

But what did Gilkey mean when writing about the great wave of liberalism in Western theology? Even though his point of departure is identical with that of Räsänen's early works, Gilkey attempts to find a new line of interpretation in the situation where the liberal position has changed all the parameters. Therefore, the purpose of Gilkey's article is somewhat different from the one in the *Authority*. Nevertheless, these two scholars share the same belief in the Enlightenment spirit and the inevitability of the scientific world view: "Suddenly a vast panoply of divine deeds and events recorded in Scripture are no longer regarded as having actually happened."<sup>58</sup>

For Gilkey, liberalism has brought two kinds of problems to theology. On the one hand, we have a new problem with orthodoxy and, on the other, we must cope with the new liberal reconstruction of religion.

Our problem begins with the liberal repudiation of orthodoxy. One facet of this repudiation was the rejection of the category 'revelation through the special activity of God,' what we now call 'special revelation,' 'Heilsgeschichte,' or popularly 'the mighty acts of God.'<sup>59</sup>

Orthodox belief, according to Gilkey, had "denied the reign of causal law in the phenomenal realm of space and time." In the scholarly field, then, this created a tension since liberal theologians could no longer approach Scriptures from that kind of perspective. "To the liberals, therefore, this orthodox view of revelation represented a primitive, prescientific form of religion and should be modernized."<sup>60</sup> It is easy to see that Räsänen, when titling his own article "On the authority of the Bible," has adopted Gilkey's point of departure.

As regards the latter issue, Gilkey remarks that liberal interpretation has made the construction of theology difficult. Based on the new world view, namely on the grounds of causal order and universality, liberalism "reinterpreted the concept of revelation." God's acts, recorded in the Bible, ceased to be "special, particular, and concerned with phenomenal reality."

Rather, the divine activity became the continual, creative, immanent activity of God, an activity which worked through the natural order and which

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<sup>57</sup> Gilkey, *JR* 41 (1961) 200. Cf. Räsänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 77–78.

<sup>58</sup> Gilkey, *JR* 41 (1961) 195.

<sup>59</sup> Gilkey, *JR* 41 (1961) 194.

<sup>60</sup> Gilkey, *JR* 41 (1961) 194.



could therefore be apprehended in universal human experiences of dependence, of harmony, and of value—experiences which in turn issued in developed religious feeling and religious consciousness. The demands both of world order and of universality were thus met by this liberal reconstruction of religion.<sup>61</sup>

What should scholars then do with their Rankean view of history and nineteenth century rationalist hermeneutics? Gilkey states that most scholars are left in an ambiguous situation. They attempt to maintain two contradictory concepts of truth at the same time. When “modern biblical writers” speak “*theologically*” of the revelatory event, they speak “in the biblical and orthodox terms of a God who speaks and acts.” When, however, they “function as *scientific* historians or archaeologists and ask what actually happened, they speak of that same prior event in purely naturalistic terms.” By trying to adopt both a theological and scientific reading, then, these scholars “repudiate all the concrete elements that in the biblical account made the event itself unique.”<sup>62</sup>

These are precisely the categories Räsänen uses in his early hermeneutics. For both of these scholars, a “scientific” (positivist, Rankean etc.) approach makes the traditional theological understanding untenable. Should one remain in the liberal camp, one should hold most biblical stories as mere “interpretations by Hebrew faith,” as Gilkey says. The theological interpretation found in the texts themselves must thus be based on subjective experience. Hence the conclusion: if one follows the line of liberal hermeneutics, it results in the idea of natural religion.

When we are asked about what actually happened, and how revelation actually occurred, all we can say is that in the continuum of the natural order an unusual event rescued the Hebrews from a sad fate; from this they concluded there must be somewhere a great God who loved them; thus they interpreted their own past in terms of his dealings with them and created all the other familiar characteristics of Hebrew religion: covenant, law, and prophecy.<sup>63</sup>

For Gilkey, however, this understanding of Hebrew religion is strictly “liberal.” If one still continues to use traditional theological language in such a situation, modern cosmology destroys theology. Traditional concepts can no longer have the theological meaning orthodoxy once proclaimed. “This

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<sup>61</sup> Gilkey, *JR* 41 (1961) 195.

<sup>62</sup> Gilkey, *JR* 41 (1961) 199, emphasis his. The Rankean principle recurs in his article several times.

<sup>63</sup> Gilkey, *JR* 41 (1961) 202.

in turn has emptied the Bible's theological categories of divine deeds and divine revelations of all their univocal meaning."

Räisänen takes Gilkey's ideas farther. In his article he lists several new examples of historical problems. For instance, no one can harmonize different Christological conceptions without doing injustice to the texts. Furthermore, there are no connecting factors between the synoptic gospels and Johannine Christology. As regards eschatology, Räisänen suggests that Weissian views should be now recognized. One should "take seriously the facts" that Jesus' proclamation about the Kingdom of heaven was apocalyptic, and that parousia was never realized.<sup>64</sup>

Another example is atonement, which, for Räisänen, is just one interpretation among many. "The generation of such an interpretation has probably—at least partly—been affected by the confusion over Jesus' way of death." In Luke's theology there is no reference to the soteriological interpretation of Jesus' death. This is why Räisänen questions the relevance of soteriological interpretation and its prominent status in Christian theology.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, the concept of the resurrection should be assessed in a new way. Räisänen contends that the question is irrelevant on the grounds that the whole conception has nothing to offer to a modern thinker. "But what significance can the conception of Jesus' resurrection have for us since the apocalyptic frames in which it belongs indivisibly have been demolished? The course of history has invalidated both Jesus' and Paul's views of the future."<sup>66</sup>

In the *Authority* Räisänen, thus, follows both Gilkey's and Käsemann's lines of thought. He selects examples of scholarly arguments over biblical passages and believes that critical investigation has proven the Bible inconsistent and incoherent. Many theological themes, even in crucial dogmatic issues, contradict each other. Furthermore, the world view of the Bible is supernatural and thereby unacceptable to a modern writer. This is why a completely new attitude towards the Scriptures is needed. Räisänen develops Gilkey's ideas and adapts them to New Testament hermeneutics.

This is where the essential hermeneutical premises are introduced. Räisänen takes up the dialectics of personal experience and their

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<sup>64</sup> The reference is to Johannes Weiss's influential theory about consistent eschatology; see for instance Kümmel, *History*, 226ff.

<sup>65</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 80–81.

<sup>66</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 81.

interpretation. He looks for a perfect description for the phenomenon, how theological ideas are expressed, and attempts to explain it in the most natural way. This is where he repudiates the idea of divine revelation and, in Gilkey's footsteps, presents a theory of natural religion.

The Bible comprises a long series of *experiences* and *interpretations*, which is an eloquent description of the generations of struggle over the fundamental questions of life. To rely again on traditional terminology, we are speaking of a huge panorama of "natural" religion—and therefore not of a document of "special revelation." All religion is "natural" and so too Christianity—including the "gospel" despite all Barthian counter arguments—represents "religion."<sup>67</sup>

A slight shift in hermeneutics has taken place, though. What for Gilkey represented "strictly liberal" interpretation is, for Räsänen, the very basis for a consistent interpretation theory. Räsänen accepts all Gilkey's ideas that concern liberal premises and makes them principles of his own hermeneutics. For Räsänen, Enlightenment science marks the highest level of historical investigation. Modern cosmology dictates the interpretation of particular passages. Biblical stories prove to be interpretations of Hebrew faith. The Bible is a document of natural religion. All this, of course, is not very far from what Gilkey himself presents in his article. Gilkey accepts the new cosmology and never questions Enlightenment science. Since he concludes, however, that all this "empties" theological categories, he challenges the scholarly community to construct a new ontology for trustworthy hermeneutics: "What we desperately need is a theological ontology that will put intelligible and credible meanings into our analogical categories of divine deeds and of divine self-manifestation through events."<sup>68</sup>

Räsänen, in his reinterpretation of Gilkey's views, has a point. Gilkey is unable to provide a plausible alternative to liberal hermeneutics. He postulates a new ontology but never argues for it. All he suggests in his article is a complete separation between historical study and confessional interpretation, "what that Word might mean for us today." It does not help

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<sup>67</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 82–83. Compared with Barr, whom Räsänen quotes regularly in his later writings, he attacks the idea of authority even more intensively. Barr is more cautious. When he writes on the same subject he answers his own question "Has the Bible any authority?" by saying: "I will begin straight away by answering with a rigorous 'Yes'." And he continues: "The Bible has authority because its authority, in some form or other, is built into the structure of Christian faith and the Christian tradition." Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, 52.

<sup>68</sup> Gilkey, *JR* 41 (1961) 203.

much if we claim that our object is “what we believe” about God. Gilkey proposes that we distinguish between “Hebrew recital” and “our recital” in interpretation. This would probably lead merely to a Bultmannian, existentialist version of biblical theology—but Gilkey does not discuss that current in modern hermeneutics.<sup>69</sup>

According to Räsänen, there is no special revelation. Instead, in the Scriptures, we face a panorama of “natural theology.” Biblical texts reflect a primitive, prescientific form of religion, as Gilkey stated. This is why the texts should be seen as a compilation of human interpretations. For Räsänen, the Bible as a whole comprises a series of such interpretations—not to mention later history of interpretation in the Church. Such a view echoes the words of Bultmann in the epilogue of his *Theology of the New Testament*. Bultmann suggests that New Testament writings should be treated “in their variety,” i.e. each writing by itself, “in which case the individual writings can then be understood as members of an historical continuity.”<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, Gilkey’s influence may have been more important than one might at first suspect. Even before Räsänen’s theory, Gilkey’s distinctions between biblical mythology and modern cosmology and between experience and interpretation create a pattern of interpreting personal experiences. Räsänen just took this idea and polished it into a hermeneutical theory. For both scholars, Hebrew interpretations are emptied of meaning. Every new process of signification, even if it belongs to the same tradition, is completely new. There is no continuity on the level of metaphysical content.

Gilkey already suggests that, at least in the liberal reading, biblical stories are “interpretations by Hebrew faith,” based on the experiences the Jews had in new situations. As noted, they “interpreted their own past” by using theological conceptions. Gilkey naturally believes that, unless we can give some analogical meaning to these concepts, each “has for us vanished

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<sup>69</sup> Barr would disagree here. “Being a Christian means—among other things—being tied up with the God of the Bible, with biblical ideas of God and traditions about him, with Jesus Christ, about whom almost our only source of guidance lies in the Bible as primary written source.” Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, 52.

<sup>70</sup> Bultmann, *Theology II*, 237. As regards Barr, Räsänen could probably accuse him of an inconsistency similar to Gilkey’s. Barr does in fact treat the Bible in the same manner as Räsänen, but he makes a leap of faith when existential questions become important. “Secondly, the Bible is involved in all this not as a true book which contains true information about God and about various other persons and past events. The Bible is more a battleground than a book of true facts. Holy Scripture has a function in the winning of salvation.” Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, 53. Barr makes a religious postulation Räsänen himself refuses to make.

into subjective Hebrew religious experience and interpretation.”<sup>71</sup> In Räsänen’s thought, this is precisely what happens in biblical history. Hermeneutical theory must be built on these premises. Doctrinal theology and creedal Christianity must be abandoned in biblical interpretation. Theological statements have no permanent meaning. All we have is a “long series” of interpretations. New statements occur every time the congregation experiences significant events or conflict situations.<sup>72</sup>

These examples present the hermeneutical pattern that later became Räsänen’s trademark in all his work. Suffice it to refer here only to the “model” of historical interpretation he proposes in his *Beyond New Testament Theology*: “I have suggested that an account of early Christian thought should describe this thought in terms of an interplay between tradition, experience and interpretation.”<sup>73</sup> The chain of interpretation, for Räsänen, is the only pattern that can explain the nature of New Testament thought after the idea of “special revelation” has been abandoned.

Räsänen follows Bultmann’s ideas also in the sense that he rejects any possibility of constructing a unified theology in the Scriptures. The theory of natural religion provides a completely new approach to the Bible. This creates an almost nominalist hermeneutics—at least as far as the Bible is considered: if particular statements are but personal interpretations, there cannot be any “real” truths behind them. All scholars have are masses of individual ideas. For Räsänen, this is the crucial fact that changes one’s approach to the Scriptures, and he ends his article with a statement:

Thus, I do not see the Bible as a document of supernatural ‘revelation’ but as a *source of inspiration and a provider of stimuli*.<sup>74</sup>

There are several conclusions to be drawn from these statements. Firstly, Räsänen’s basic view is dependent on Troeltsch’s principles and a “Rankean” view of history. His hermeneutical theory does not sound

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<sup>71</sup> Gilkey, *JR* 41 (1961) 203.

<sup>72</sup> An emphasis on sociology, as such, is no novelty in New Testament interpretation. Already Troeltsch, whose impact on historical study was noted above, developed his analysis in a sociological treatment of Christian groups. He put emphasis on the history of influence and reception in his work *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (1911); see Rendtorff, *TRE* 34 (2002) 134.

<sup>73</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, 122.

<sup>74</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 85; (*italics his*). Following Morton Enslin, Räsänen calls this a “true liberal” approach that confesses that God has never said anything that is not directed by the human brain; see page 84.

consistent has it not been understood in the context of nineteenth century rationalist hermeneutics. Räisänen builds on Gilkey's "liberal repudiation of orthodoxy." He never questions it. He agrees with Gilkey's naturalist premises and believes that biblical supernatural miracles, as well as the miracles of the Buddha, "did not really happen." Modern cosmology has emptied biblical theological statements of meaning.<sup>75</sup>

Secondly, there can be no normative dogmatics. Bultmann, Käsemann, and Gilkey were right in maintaining that modern biblical studies (in Finland: "exegetics") lay the groundwork for denominational polyphony. Räisänen explains this as follows: "My recipe for systematic theology [i.e. dogmatics] would be '*biblical relativism*': a theology based on just a few profound themes and a theology that draws stimuli from the Bible." (italics his)<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, this leads to a re-evaluation not only of several particular doctrines in traditional Christian theology but salvation itself. Räisänen, referring to Enslin, states boldly that the crucial result of such new hermeneutics is the rejection of dogmatic exclusivism. "This kind of view abandons all exclusivist Christomonisms (the exclusive statements of the biblical authors are *their* interpretation)."<sup>77</sup>

One can see that this is not merely an issue of historicism, or hermeneutical theory but, instead, also a theological and spiritual question. The key word Christomonism means here a Christ-centered soteriological view. The new claim states: human beings will not be saved by Christ alone. Thus Räisänen aims at a reinterpretation of religion, too. It is not merely a question of understanding particular texts. He wishes to contest traditional Christian teaching about salvation. Räisänen also criticizes Bultmann for remaining a Christ-centered Christian. He is convinced that Bultmann drifts into trouble with his *Entmythologisierung* because he does not draw out all the conclusions. This is why Räisänen then chooses Fritz Buri who ventures into the task of *Entkerygmatisierung*. The Bible or rather Christian theology must abandon the *kerygma*. Quoting Buri Räisänen writes that a "saving event"—which as a term is preserved even here—will not rely on "Christ's saving work" but on the event where human beings can

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<sup>75</sup> Adam, who parallels Räisänen's views with those of Harvey (in the latter's book *The Historian and Believer*) states that Troeltsch's ideas can be seen in their hermeneutics (quoting Troeltsch through Harvey): "Once the historical method is applied to biblical science and church history, it is a leaven that alters everything and, finally, bursts apart the entire structure of theological methods until the present." Adam, *Making Sense*, 103; cf. Harvey, *The Historian*, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 83.

<sup>77</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 84. Italics his.

understand their “authentic selves.”<sup>78</sup> Räsänen attempts to define a new liberal way of thinking theologically that acknowledges the historical background of Christian tradition but confesses that the way to God is also possible without Christ.<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, and what is important for the present analysis, Räsänen concludes that the history of explicating the Bible’s theological ideas can be described as an endless chain of interpretation. This is what natural theology means for him in practice. Räsänen states that people have interpreted their religious experiences in different ways. New interpretations are always based on the previous ones but, nevertheless, they are in some respect also new, bringing new aspects to the fore or even explicating different kinds of experiences.

It is true that Räsänen’s way of using the term “natural theology” may confuse some scholars. Reimarus was a deist, Strauss was a deist, and Bultmann never questioned this aspect when adopting their line of biblical interpretation. Does Räsänen mean that his theory is based on Deism as well? This is hardly so, even though the conclusion depends on how one defines Deism in biblical scholarship. Natural theology, for Räsänen, does not mean theology constructed on the basis of the beauty and rationality in nature. It may come close, though, if one is very strict with the definition. Räsänen does search for a rational explanation for the emergence of doctrines. He states that it is dependent on the rational behavior of religious human beings. And he has adopted the conviction that the natural sciences provide a trustworthy picture of reality. All this is very “natural.” But he is not a Deist, after all. Räsänen, in many of his writings, appears to be a (kind of) Darwinist for whom nature can be chaotic. His views are not dependent on the idea that God’s nature must be beautiful and rational.

Räsänen has himself stated that he used the term “natural religion” a little bit by mistake. In his 1997 article on the science of religion and

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<sup>78</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 84–85. Räsänen’s quotation of Buri’s text goes as follows: “Das Heilsgeschehen besteht nicht . . . in einer einmalig geschehenen Heilstat in Christus, sondern darin, dass es sich ereignen kann, dass Menschen sich in ihrer Eigentlichkeit so verstehen können, wie es im Christusmythos zum Ausdruck gekommen ist.” Räsänen also refers to Buri’s claim that holding onto the *kerygma* is just a last vestige of mythology; Räsänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 86 fn. 15.

<sup>79</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 84. As this is just a short proclamation, Räsänen never discusses the philosophy-of-religion issues that would further ask who this un-biblical “God” is and how can one have any propositional knowledge of it/him/her. Räsänen himself has here presented several propositional claims about salvation and finding the true God, but he does not try to apply these into his own theory.



biblical scholarship, he corrects false interpretations of his words by stating that he never used the term in a dogmatic sense. He did not refer to the concept of natural religion in the manner the British Deists did. Räisänen just borrowed the term from Langdon Gilkey and used it to oppose the concept of supernatural or revelatory religion.<sup>80</sup>

Therefore natural theology, for Räisänen, means something else entirely. As there can be no unchanging, stable doctrines, the explanation of religious thinking must always be different. Each generation interprets its tradition in a new way. Inner experiences are still valid in new contexts, and the fundamental questions of life and death are permanent, but the mechanism that produces interpretations is immanent. Natural theology, for Räisänen, means that people interpret their experiences with the help of the tools that they happen to have in a given situation. In modern times people no longer use the mythical concepts of ancient times. Therefore, modern faith has little to do with the religious conviction of the apostles.

This, however, was no novelty, as we saw above. Bultmann, in his statements in the *Theology of the New Testament*, had proposed similar views already decades before Räisänen:

Theology's continuity through the centuries consists not in holding fast to once formulated propositions but in the constant vitality with which faith, fed by its origin, understandingly masters its constantly new historical situations.<sup>81</sup>

This quotation provokes the question, how much is Räisänen ultimately indebted to Bultmann? Even though the issue itself will be treated later in this study, the question is essential. There are some striking similarities. Bultmann writes that there is continuity in Christian theology, a kind of chain that constantly produces new interpretations. It is not based on "holding fast to" previous theological statements or any propositions that have been formulated in the apostolic age. Instead, new theology, according to Bultmann, will be produced in new historical situations. This is

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<sup>80</sup> See Räisänen, *TAik 102* (1997) 121 fn. 9. "For the sake of clarity we shall declare once more (because the issue has produced some misinterpretations) that, when using the term "natural religion" back in 1972, I did not use it in a strict dogmatic sense but (as the article by Langdon Gilkey does) simply as an opposition to "supernatural" or "revelatory" religion. When using the term I did not mean to imply any presuppositions about for instance the universal features of religion."

<sup>81</sup> Bultmann, *Theology II*, 237.



not that far from Räsänen's idea that new generations give old traditions completely new interpretations.

There continue to be other important questions that emerge from such statements. First, what is Räsänen's precise relationship to the Bultmannian tradition of *Entmythologisierung*? It seems evident that he has learned much from the history-of-religions school. He uses similar examples and refers to scholars that belong to that movement. A direct relation to that tradition, however, is not at all clear. Räsänen has supposedly developed something quite original, as well. This issue begs for a more thorough treatment.<sup>82</sup> Second, one begins to wonder what kind of view of language and meaning is being implied in the idea of the chain of interpretation? How can the convictions of modern times relate to the beliefs of early Christianity? If biblical vocabulary is condemned as mythical, should one expect there to be some substance behind the language that could be treated as a meaningful basis for new interpretations? Or should we conclude that the links in the chain have actually been broken and later interpretations have nothing in common with the earlier ones? We shall return to these issues later. Before that, however, it is useful to discuss the role of Räsänen's Quran studies in his hermeneutical theory.

In this subchapter we have considered the genesis of Räsänen's hermeneutical theory. First analyses on the issue show that Räsänen was constructing his theory from the beginning of his career. His hermeneutical pattern speaking of a long series of "experiences and interpretations" appears in its completed form already in his 1972 article *Authority*. The theory builds on several premises, and among the most important is a belief that the historical-critical method has proven almost beyond doubt the diversity of early Christian thought. Following Gilkey, Räsänen rejects the orthodoxy that has denied the reign of causal law. He treats biblical stories as interpretations of Hebrew faith and makes this view the basis for the idea of chain of interpretation. Since Räsänen rejects divine inspiration—on the grounds of contradictions and other similar issues treated in the previous chapter—he himself proposes an immanent theory of interpretation. The early theory already builds on sociological categories and focuses on new contexts and evolving situations in the community.

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<sup>82</sup> Troeltsch's and Bultmann's close adherence to the history-of-religions school will later be a significant factor as biblical theology and especially Stendahl's impact on the field will be assessed, see chapter 6 below.

### 2.3. *Quran-Criticism's Significance for the Chain of Interpretation*

Räisänen's hermeneutical ideas were not developed solely in terms of rationalist materialism. This is quite important to note, especially because Strauss' and Troeltsch's influence has no doubt been significant both in German biblical studies and in Lutheran Scandinavia following earlier historical-critical ideas. Räisänen himself has said that his theory of interpretation was already developed when he was writing his early monograph about Jesus in the Quran, *Das koranische Jesusbild* (1971).

During the year 1997 there was an enthusiastic discussion concerning the relation of biblical studies and science of religion in Finland. Räisänen took part in the discussion by publishing an article in the theological periodical *Teologinen Aikakauskirja*. In his article, called "Uskontotiede ja eksegetiikka" ["The Science of Religion and Exegetics"], Räisänen explained how he had already quite early in his career concluded that hermeneutical theory must take the relation of tradition and experience into consideration.<sup>83</sup>

The article in general discusses the status and nature of biblical studies in a "non-confessional" university, as Räisänen says. He supports the idea that in a state university there is no room for any "theological" biblical studies but that such investigation belongs to churches. These ideas will be dealt with in other chapters, but here it is useful to attend to his definition of hermeneutics. Räisänen emphasizes the significance of his early investigations for the whole structure of his interpretation theory.<sup>84</sup>

This triad of tradition, experience and (new) interpretation is my primary suggestion for a pattern of interpreting early Christian religion (but not exclusively for that). I have attempted to explicate it in my book *Beyond New Testament Theology* and different articles on the same issue, but it can be found even in the epilogue of my monograph *Das koranische Jesusbild* (1971), albeit without the context of a sociology of knowledge. My interpretation of Muhammad's picture of Jesus led in this direction—Muhammad himself interprets the Jesus-tradition in the light of his own

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<sup>83</sup> Räisänen's article is a comment on and an answer to the earlier writings of the Finnish scholars Ilkka Pyysiäinen and Risto Uro, Räisänen, *TAik* 102 (1997) 119–125. Here again the Finnish term for biblical studies, namely "eksegetiikka" follows the German "Exegese."

<sup>84</sup> On the basis of a private interview I can say that this is the article, mentioned above in the introduction, where Räisänen presents the main results from an unpublished manuscript on the same issue in the early 1970s. This was the period when Räisänen was interested in the science of religion and wrote the studies on the Quran in order to qualify for the chair of Science of Religion.

experience—and so I looked for parallel phenomena in the development of tradition in biblical texts.<sup>85</sup>

Then at the end Räsänen connects his method to the theory of science of religion. He uses Wilfred Cantwell Smith's theory that sees religion as an interactive process of "cumulative tradition" and individual faith. Räsänen wishes to replace faith by "experience" since it would better maintain the immanent, science-of-religion approach in the investigation.<sup>86</sup>

Returning back to Räsänen's book *Jesusbild*, one finds the same pattern in the monograph's epilogue. After investigating Muhammad's picture of Jesus he states that Muhammad interprets biblical tradition "through the prism" ("durch das Prisma") of his "own experiences" ("Erfahrungen"). This, according to Räsänen, is not a new phenomenon.

Also the growth and formation of the Bible can be described in terms of the scheme: "inherited tradition—actualized reinterpretation."<sup>87</sup>

Thus, it is clear that Räsänen actually developed his hermeneutical theory of the chain of interpretation through his study of all ancient religious texts. His point of departure is in science of religion. For Räsänen, the Bible must be read in the same manner as any other book. And as for Reimarus so for Räsänen, the book that was primarily meant was the Quran. Such a connection is not surprising since, in many respects, Räsänen's hermeneutics build on Reimarus' premises. Therefore, even though Räsänen has apparently been unaware of Reimarus' interest in the Quran, both his scholarly approach and his hermeneutics end up looking like Reimarus'. Räsänen just develops these ideas much farther.

In fact, Räsänen's early studies on the Quran present a clear picture of how the comparison between these two books leads to the construction of a hermeneutical principle. For Räsänen, the development of religious convictions is a matter of explaining personal experience in the light of one's inherited tradition and its descriptions. In his Finnish articles Räsänen has explicated his views in detail. As he writes on the Quran he states that the Quran's picture of Jesus appears to be quite consistent. He says that, according to his analysis and interpretation, it consistently

<sup>85</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 102 (1997) 122.

<sup>86</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 102 (1997) 122. Räsänen refers here to page 100 fn. 38 in *Das koranische Jesusbild*.

<sup>87</sup> Räsänen, *Jesusbild*, 94. "Auch das Heranwachsen und die Gestaltung der Bibel kann im Rahmen des Schema 'geerbte Tradition—aktualisierende Neuinterpretation' beschrieben werden."

reflects Muhammad's own experiences and views. "What Muhammad had heard about Jesus he would—consciously or unconsciously—reinterpret in terms of his own experience."<sup>88</sup> Through this process Jesus, as well as Abraham, Moses, and some figures from Arabic legends, became Muhammad's precursors. He thus joined previous messengers from God who all at their own time proclaimed the true word of God.<sup>89</sup>

Räisänen assumes that Jesus' story must have been very comforting to Muhammad who also was accused of false teaching. Some people claimed that he performed witchcraft and some assumed that he was possessed—accusations that had also been hurled at Jesus. If he (Muhammad) experienced opposition, he knew that Jesus had encountered similar opposition all the way to his death. And since Jesus' disciples were his "helpers" and "devoted" (from: surrender), this comes close to the words Muhammad used: "Jesus and his disciples are just like Muhammad with his own followers."<sup>90</sup>

Finally, Räisänen concludes that it is actually Muhammad who is the exemplary person to prove the phenomenon of chain of interpretation.

In Muhammad's view Jesus thus finds his place without further ado as one link in the long chain of messengers, and at the end of the chain one finds Muhammad, "the seal of the prophets." Jesus is not even the most significant link in this chain—Abraham and Moses are given more attention. But of all the messengers Jesus is closest to Muhammad in time, and he has foretold the coming of the Arabian prophet.<sup>91</sup>

Räisänen developed his ideas further in his second study on the Quran, *The Idea of Divine Hardening*. As the subject of the book is predestination, the particular analysis of the book will be presented later in subchapter 5.3. The basic idea in his early monograph reiterates the exact same points in the quotations above. He bases his hermeneutical theory of the chain of interpretation on Muhammad's reinterpretation of tradition through his personal experience. Räisänen then generalizes this idea and applies to all religious literature.<sup>92</sup>

According to Räisänen, a "chain" of interpretation can naturally be found also New Testament writings. In the same 1997 article he emphasizes that, in the New Testament tradition, there are different layers that

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<sup>88</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 70.

<sup>89</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 70.

<sup>90</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 70.

<sup>91</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 71.

<sup>92</sup> See Räisänen, *Divine Hardening*, 96; and subchapter 5.3.

represent different views of Christology. He claims that Luke, for instance, presents a subordinated view of Christ. Christ only does what God wants to do through him. According to Räsänen, such views can easily be paralleled with some descriptions of Jesus in the Quran. Furthermore, they resemble Muhammad's own position as he performs his remarkable deeds and signs under God's providence.<sup>93</sup>

Therefore, Räsänen believes that his idea of the chain of interpretation is universal. He has created a pattern that can be applied to any religion and any situation. It is apparent that his investigations into the Quran have been crucial in developing the method. As he explains Muhammad's self-understanding, he casts him as a theologian who attempts to explain the Jewish-Christian tradition in his own time by creating new interpretations based on his own religious experiences. Since this seems to conform to the diversity of New Testament teachings, the pattern finally explains the genesis of religion as such.

But what should one say about Reimarus' original criticism against both the Quran and the New Testament? Does this view lead to Deism? It is clear that, from the very start, Reimarus intends to prove that Deism's conception of religion is the only rational way to speak about God and the nature of his revelation. Through critical investigation he first shows that the Bible cannot be revelatory. It is a religious fantasy, not history, like the Quran. In the eyes of a humanist living during the Enlightenment, Christianity no longer appears as a religion of mercy. Instead, biblical texts enslave and exploit people and incite people to evil. Therefore, in Reimarus' writings, the medieval apologetics of earlier Quran criticism turns into an apology for Deism. "What is left is the only path which can help us to find something valid, it is the speech of nature, the book of nature, God's creation and the traits of divine perfection."<sup>94</sup>

For Räsänen, however, such an understanding of the biblical tradition no longer leads to Deism. This is consistent with his thought and even to be expected because Räsänen is building an immanent hermeneutics. As we noted above, he never accepted Deism's belief in a God who creates this world and makes human beings in his own image. Human reason, for Räsänen, is not a means for finding out God's works in nature. Instead, reason is to be considered *ratio*, the autonomous source of pure

<sup>93</sup> Räsänen, *Raamattunäkemystä etsimässä*, 71–72.

<sup>94</sup> See Reimarus (*Lessing's Werke* 15), 175; the passage is treated in subchapter 1.2. above.

knowledge that can discern between true and false not only in what concerns the scientific investigation of nature but also religion.

For Räsänen, comparing Quran criticism with biblical criticism helps to prove that the Bible cannot be inerrant word of God. Canonical texts are not revelatory. And since they are not, they must inevitably be human products. This is the key to his idea for creating the hermeneutics of the chain of interpretation. If biblical writings turn out to be mere religious texts written in different historical situations and in the sphere of different traditions, new ideas must be understood as new interpretations of old ideas. These interpretations form a chain in a particular tradition. The only link between different interpretations is the weight of tradition that directs new views by giving them some kind of point of departure.

This kind of approach leads to a sociological reduction of the development of theology. The peculiar part its premise: that every element in the inferential process is immanent. Therefore, Räsänen's hermeneutics also encompasses the science of religion. It is applicable to any religion, which was already implied as the premises were chosen. The development of both Islam and Christianity can be explained by a similar theory. And the theory is rationalist: it claims that it can explain religion by using immanent arguments. Religion is but a matter of human experience, and the handling and interpretation of these experiences.

The analysis shows, thus, that Räsänen's basic hermeneutical theory is dependent on his studies of the Quran. It is true that one cannot overlook Räsänen's background in the historical-critical movement. Neither can one forget the factual influence of Gilkey's article. Nevertheless, on the level of ancient texts, it was the studying of the Quran that finally convinced Räsänen of the grand metanarrative: how religion works. Religion is about tradition, experience, and interpretation. Like Muhammad, other religious leaders have reinterpreted their own tradition when facing conflicts in their community. This result, then, leads one to ask, how should one define and treat experience in such an interpretation theory?

#### 2.4. *Natural Theology and the Problem of "Experience"*

In his early article *Authority* Räsänen presents the theses that have had unexpected influence on his entire career. Even in his final public lecture before retirement Räsänen mentioned this article and confessed that, throughout his career, he has followed the lines it draws out. At this later phase he was in the process of publishing his large work on Christian

beliefs, the *Rise*, and told his listeners that, in a sense, all his life as a New Testament scholar he has been developing the hermeneutical ideas on the chain of interpretation that he first formulated in his early article.<sup>95</sup>

We have lingered over this long history-of-influence in Räsänen's own work because these findings and definitions have had significant personal value for Räsänen himself. He starts *Authority* by discussing different views on the Bible and divine inspiration—from ultra-liberal all the way to fundamentalism. Then he proceeds with a personal comment that his studies at the Faculty of Theology were precisely what led him into the process where his traditional views changed. This inner struggle made him doubt divine inspiration and finally led him to question the whole authority of the Bible as a religious text. During his theological studies, then, both of his views, of religion and of salvation, changed. Such a personal process changes not only personal career expectations but also one's view of God and his alleged or assumed work in this world.<sup>96</sup>

The main reason for this kind of process has, of course, been the historical-critical scholarship that at that time was mainly conducted in Lutheran Germany. From Reimarus onwards the radical tradition had questioned practically every doctrinal view in the New Testament. Therefore, the basic point of departure for Räsänen's hermeneutics is quite simple and common to the Lutheran field of New Testament studies. He has taken part in the very same discussion that has been alive from generation to generation, starting with the great names in scholarship that we have mentioned above. The theological impact of Rudolf Bultmann is important because Räsänen focuses on "experience." His relation to Bultmann is not simple, though, since he appears to define experience in quite a different way. Bultmann holds both to the phenomenological Marburg tradition and a transcendental idea of kerygma. These are

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<sup>95</sup> As noted before, Räsänen published his speech in Finnish, see *Vartija* 3 (2006) 83–95.

<sup>96</sup> These kinds of arguments are difficult to treat in a study like this, but as Räsänen often refers to them in his writings, they must be considered significant. As they are discussed, one must be strict in noting that when a traditional Christian view of God changes, there must be sufficient evidence for the new view, too. This means simply that it is the duty of other scholars to ask, how does Räsänen know for instance that God does not ask for atonement, or that salvation is the same for Christians and "pagans" alike. There are no general or obvious truths on which the liberal interpretation can rely. This is why all its own beliefs must be discussed as any other doctrine in the theological tradition.



difficult points for Räsänen to accept. We shall return to these issues later in this study.<sup>97</sup>

Nevertheless, Räsänen places experience in the core of his own hermeneutics. This raises the question, how does he then define experience? We can learn from the discussion that arose in Finland on the issue. Risto Uro comments on Räsänen's theory by asking that, if experience is understood in a profane way and put into the core of the hermeneutical process, what will be left of the experience itself? As a theoretical category is it still distinct from interpretation?<sup>98</sup> In his answer Räsänen admits that his concept of experience does not differ much from the concepts of "new context" or "new situation." He just chooses experience. But experience for him covers "everyday experience." He accepts "profane" experiences. This, of course, is understandable because Räsänen, in his works on the Quran, focuses on sociological crises and calls them the crucial experiences that change the horizon of both Muhammad's and Paul's personal interpretations.<sup>99</sup>

A traditional reader could be in danger of missing a crucial point here. Experience, in the usual history-of-religions sense, means some kind of emotional impression (German: "Erlebnis") or even feeling ("Gefühl") that is dependent on reflection and occurs when one faces the transcendent. This is also how many scholars investigating the phenomenology of religion before Räsänen have defined the term. As Räsänen himself remarks, Rudolf Otto used the term to denote experience of the numinous, or the holy.<sup>100</sup> Räsänen wants to offer a completely different kind of solution here. He no longer implies that religious experience has to do with the transcendent. Instead, he attempts to define experience entirely in immanent language and natural arguments. The definition of experience does not rely on metaphysical epistemology. He states this already in a crucial

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<sup>97</sup> See especially subchapter 4.1. below. In principle, this is significant for Räsänen's entire theory. Balla remarks, that it is related to his attitude towards New Testament theology, too: "I have already indicated that the demand for studying experience instead of doctrine challenges New Testament theology mainly in the rejection of studying doctrine." Balla, *Challenges*, 30–31.

<sup>98</sup> Uro, *TAik 102* (1997) 108.

<sup>99</sup> Räsänen, *TAik 102* (1997) 122–123. This, of course, is in accord with Gilkey's view of experience where, in his "modern" assessment of biblical stories, he stated that Old Testament writers interpreted their own past in the light of new experiences. Gilkey, *JR 41* (1961) 202.

<sup>100</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, 123. Like Troeltsch and Bousset, Otto belongs to the founding scholars of the history-of-religion school. See Reventlow, *History*, 335–337.



passage of his 1987 article on interpretation, the translation and application of which can be found later in *Beyond*.

Therefore, instead of searching just for a certain type of inner core experience, it seems worthwhile to examine the whole spectrum of experiences, including quite mundane ones, as reflected in the material. It does not seem appropriate to limit oneself to explicitly “religious” experience, even if religious experience is understood in broader terms than just as a mystical or numinous experience.<sup>101</sup>

The first step in this reasoning concerns the term’s sphere of influence. Once again Räsänen speaks of a complete “spectrum” of experiences. Should one be open to investigating all kinds of different experiences, one cannot limit oneself merely to religious experiences. Accordingly then religious experience is not to be understood merely as numinous experience. This is how the hermeneutical horizon begins to change. Since the only logical way to continue reasoning can be found in the field of science that investigates the formal mechanics of experience, in other words the mind, Räsänen moves to psychology. This is the next step of his inference. The quotation above continues as follows:

In fact it is not clear that ‘religious’ experiences can be singled out as a distinct type of human experience at all. It is arguable that ‘religious’ experiences are psychologically similar to certain ‘non-religious’ reality-transforming experiences such as creativity. Perhaps it is simply the case that a certain type of experience is *interpreted* by some persons or groups in religious terms, and by others in different terms.<sup>102</sup>

When constructing his theory Räsänen is convinced that many different kinds of experiences are psychologically similar. In the Finnish version Räsänen says it even more clearly: “one must rather assume that it is probable” that they are psychologically similar. Since he aims at psychologizing experience, the latter becomes merely a mental function. Experience, for Räsänen, does not depend on a relation. It does not reflect anything outside mundane reality. It is just a mental act that can produce different kinds of interpretation. In practice Räsänen speaks of life situations and events and the human ability to attribute signification to them. He takes the direction Uro suspected above.

This creates problems. If Räsänen makes every experience profane, what will be the religious experience that produces—as he later says—the

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<sup>101</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, 129.

<sup>102</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, 129.

religious symbol in the symbolic world? Uro suggests that one solution would have been to call the numinous the “wholly other” as Rudolf Otto once proposed.<sup>103</sup> But as we saw, Räisänen refuses even this. He does not accept Otto’s metaphysical theory. The conclusion is ineluctable: Räisänen claims that the process he describes is one simply of everyday experience and its theological interpretation. In other words he makes a psychological reduction of religion. As he claims in his 1972 writings, there is no divine revelation whatsoever. His hermeneutics deals with human thinking. Its description is one of sociology. As the example above proves, for Räisänen, people’s interpretation of “religious” experiences must be considered as imaginative mental activity.<sup>104</sup>

The problem is rather difficult even in principle. What can be accepted as religious experience? What did Muhammad or Paul experience? One should no longer speak of any kind of interior, moving, ecstatic experience, even though Räisänen does later refer somewhat paradoxically to such examples when explaining Paul’s theology. Could one speak of an experience of meeting important and influential people like Jesus or the apostles? Or should we just assume that people can ascribe religious value to any experience of human life, such as the birth of a child or the inevitability of death, as Räisänen seems to suggest? Surprisingly, Räisänen is not clear on this subject but usually he seems to prefer normal life and common experiences. For instance Muhammad and Paul faced difficult conflicts in their community, and this, for Räisänen, is the experience that changed their theology. Therefore, Räisänen’s view on experience is quite practical.

In his *Beyond*, Räisänen returns to the issue and attempts to answer those who question his view on the nature of experience. In a subchapter called “On the problem of ‘reductionism’,” he tackles the difficulty of treating religious issues on an immanent level: “Is it not ‘reductionist’ (and, so the argument runs, wrong) to speak of what the sources call revelation and acts of God as human experiences and interpretations?” At first Räisänen denies the claim that his view would inevitably lead to a mere psychological solution.

The scholar does not, however, claim *a priori* that what the Bible—or any other scripture for that matter—presents is ‘only’ the result of psychological experiences. It is beyond the reach of scholarship to answer the question

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<sup>103</sup> Uro, *TAik 102* (1997) 107–108.

<sup>104</sup> Räisänen, *TAik 102* (1997) 123. Räisänen opposes Otto’s theory also in his Quran-studies, see Räisänen, *Divine Hardening*, 97.

what it was that *ultimately* gave rise to the experiences described or presupposed in the Bible, or in the Qur'an, or in the Bhagavadgita [*sic*], or what exactly led to the particular interpretations that came to existence. It is not for historical scholarship to say whether there is a 'metaempirical' factor behind this process or not. What it can do is prepare the ground for theological or philosophical reflection on such matters.<sup>105</sup>

Räisänen fails to answer his opponents here, though. He clearly speaks now about metaphysical experiences that "ultimately" generate religious interpretations. This is a possibility he has excluded in other passages. Furthermore, in his works and practical examples, he speaks merely about conflict situations that force new interpretations into being, especially on the issues of divine judgment and predestination. Such situations are not religious events. There can be no metaphysical experience behind those who oppose Muhammad in a new situation in the community. Neither can there be a divine spark behind the situation where most Jews do not accept Paul's message. The whole discussion would be absurd.

The sphere of the 'meta-empirical' narrows to a minimum in Räisänen practical examples. This is why, in all his writings, he categorically denies divine inspiration and demands "de-kerygmaticization." His basic problem is easily described: if the new ontology does not allow any transcendental experience, how could any experience be religious? Only immanent experience and non-transcendental interpretation exist. Räisänen seeks an immanent form of religion. He drifts into a situation where he has to assume that all Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, and Jesus himself, have just reinterpreted previous immanent ideologies in terms of their common experience.<sup>106</sup> Religion turns into an ideology. It then becomes difficult to understand religion just as a current in culture.

This, of course, is also Räisänen's conclusion in the *Beyond*. His ultimate solution for reductionism relies on the essential diversity of New Testament theology. Räisänen admits that the "actual pluralism" of theological statements forces him "to a certain kind of reductionism" because, in the end, there is nothing in New Testament theology that could prove divine inspiration.<sup>107</sup> In practice, then, Räisänen works as a reductionist and does not even deny it.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 135.

<sup>106</sup> His *Jesusbild* is in fact filled with examples of such reinterpretation, see Räisänen, *Jesusbild*, 98–99.

<sup>107</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 135–136.

<sup>108</sup> This is an important point in Räisänen's hermeneutics. It even directs the principal way scholars approach their sources. Cf. Balla's criticism: "Thus I do not accept Räisänen's

All these observations point to one and the same the direction: the ideas found in the sphere of Quran-criticism are but a small part of Räsänen's hermeneutical theory. His concept of experience needs a counterpart that can explain such kinds of practical experience. This is where the concept of myth becomes irreplaceable. It is clear that, for his reasoning, Räsänen always needs the Bultmannian (history-of-religion) concept of myth. Religion, especially the biblical version, is about myth. As people describe their religious convictions, they dress them in the clothes of myth.

Why is this so? Where does Räsänen get the explanation according to which religion is inevitably (and always) about myth? Such a view is not exactly part of Quran studies. Neither can the views of the German history-of-religion school alone explain it completely. The final explanation must be found on the level of the philosophy of science and world-views. Such a change obviously has to do with the secularization of Western thinking. Already early rationalists held all mythical descriptions of divine matters illusory. In this kind of setting scholars only need a theory that can help them explain the mechanics how mythical (biblical) religion works. This is an important question, and it will be dealt with later in detail.<sup>109</sup>

Other kinds of questions also arise. Such hermeneutics must inevitably lead to some kind of psychologizing of religious experience. There must be a scientific explanation for the emergence of all these new (immanent) interpretations. This is why it is not surprising that Räsänen later presents a straightforward psychological reduction of Paul's religious experience, for example. He states that Paul had ecstatic visions and as a Jewish enthusiast he tended to interpret them in a religious way—thus creating his individual views about soteriology. These interpretations will be discussed later in detail in a chapter of their own.

All in all, Räsänen has no doubt benefited from his experiences in writing Quran-criticism. There are certain principles in his investigation that also affect his views on biblical texts. He is convinced that, in a scientific context, the Bible must be read in the same manner as any other book, and this includes the Quran. It is true that Räsänen never directly applies Reimarus' principles in his work, and he evidently thinks that the principles that Riccoldo and his followers used were quite straightforward

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attempt to separate the study of experience from the study of the interpretation of the experience." Balla, *Challenges*, 32.

<sup>109</sup> See especially chapter 10.

and even insensitive. Nevertheless, Räsänen in his own study uses similar rationalist criteria when assessing the Bible's supernatural myths or ostensibly inconsistent stories.

The final pattern, then, in Räsänen's hermeneutics, runs parallel to Reimarus' interpretation, even though he arrives at his conclusions from another direction. Both the Bible and the Quran, for Räsänen, are filled with stories that reflect only individual interpretations of the religious tradition they are a part of. It is useless to speculate about whether Räsänen could have arrived at similar conclusions without investigating the Quran, because he published his study on the Quran's view of Jesus a whole year before he wrote his article on the authority of the Bible. Muhammad's role as an extraordinary reformer of the Jewish-Christian tradition is essential for Räsänen's view of the chain of interpretation.

### 2.5. *Contribution to Contemporary Discussion II*

The enigma of the historical-critical method comes to the fore as Räsänen's views on methodology are considered. If, as he says, no biblical criticism other than the historical-critical is possible or valid, what precisely is this historical method? Should one assume that Reimarus was right in his Deistic reduction of biblical theology? Or was Strauss right when he rejected the historical reliability of the Gospels and focused on the relation between mythical language and Hegelian *Vorstellung*? We discussed earlier how the influence of different philosophies on biblical studies should be critically examined when methodology is assessed. Räsänen has not yet taken part in this discussion. What is the real history of Jesus' life, and how can we find it? Räsänen appears to be unable to explicate the basic nature of the historical study he supports. He does, of course, use form critical criteria and redaction criticism but, as we have seen, most of the important and interesting historical conclusions and claims concerning Jesus have nothing to do with these methods. Räsänen appears to treat all "scientific" readings of the New Testament as historical, as long as they reflect the intentions of German historicism.

There is one uniting factor, based on the attack on *Supranaturalismus*, and that is demythologizing. Räsänen agrees with theories that aim at a materialist interpretation. This is the reason why he uses the criteria of authenticity—both for the Bible and the Quran. A shift has taken place in the scholarly community, though. Contemporary discussion about the nature of historical investigation in general and the criteria of

authenticity in particular no longer focuses on matters that were important for Räisänen. Instead, most of the new approaches no longer question the religious identity of the original authors. Furthermore, explanatory theories are usually holistic and try to interpret particular statements and clauses in the wider context of the theological whole. This is something that redaction-critical particularism could never attain.<sup>110</sup>

Scholarly discussion on the historical method has in fact proven that the New Testament is a difficult object for historical study. Profane history writing is interested in organizations, hierarchies, leaders, politics, and power structures.<sup>111</sup> Approached from this perspective, the New Testament is quickly analysed. The Gospels describe the teaching of a wandering rabbi. Nothing alarming there—apart from his execution. Paul's turbulent life provides a bit more material for a historian, but that seldom interests scholars. All in all, considering the history of New Testament investigation, the compilation of Gospel material—the tradition history of the Gospels—has been given excessive and immoderate attention in comparison to its importance in explainign the text's final form.<sup>112</sup>

In the New Testament we find Jesus' and Paul's theologies, their version of Jewish religion, if you like. In this respect Räisänen could have been right when focusing on religion—had he not done his research in terms of a historical methodology. His ideological commitments forced him make a methodological mistake. At the point where Räisänen should have abandoned historical questions and turned to the narrative, he did just the opposite. He started to reformulate the object of his investigation. The theoretical mistake is easily defined: he made his own conclusions the *source* of his interpretative work. Sources and results were intertwined. From a contemporary perspective, one should focus on ancient sources and let them be real sources for explanatory interpretation.

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<sup>110</sup> This is probably the place to remark that in more recent books on methodology new approaches surpass the old, see McKenzie and Haynes, *To Each Its Own Meaning* (revised edition), 142, 201; several new methods are treated in the collection. Cf. the collection produced by *The Bible and Culture Collective*, namely *The Postmodern Bible*, where all significant structuralist and post-structuralist readings are presented and discussed. See for instance *The Postmodern Bible*, 4–5, 70ff., 119ff.

<sup>111</sup> See especially Elton, *Practice of History*, 31–35, 116–121.

<sup>112</sup> In this respect the historical-critical method is not very useful, for instance, in constructing biblical theology, as we shall see later. This view is quite the opposite of Mead's who states that "most Old and New Testament theologians today would embrace *the best* of modernism, namely, the critical tools it offers for biblical research." Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 82. Instead, one could say that not in a hundred years has methodological change been as revolutionary as it is today.

These comments lead to two important questions: (1) How does historical investigation today relate to the understanding of the New Testament, and (2) What is the right method for investigating theology/New Testament religion? If the New Testament is mostly about theology, and the historical-critical tradition has not provided any proper methodology for investigating systematic content, a significant challenge confronts New Testament scholarship.

Concerning the first question, we have already noted that in profane historical study the old reductionist historicism has been replaced by new approaches. Instead of merely sorting out details and pure facts historians became interested in constructing explanatory theories. Analytical deconstruction was replaced by a benevolent understanding of the original situation.<sup>113</sup> This, surprisingly, sounds a little like Ranke's original aim to understand "life" as it really happened. In the context of theology this led later to a "Hermeneutik des Einsverständnisses," as suggested by Stuhlmacher in his work on the New Testament.<sup>114</sup>

Dahl spoke of hypotheses when constructing explanatory theories for the development of history. He was on the same track as his far more famous colleague Thomas Kuhn who in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* suggested that all explanations are time-bound and historians are dependent on contemporary views and philosophies, as well as the premises they design for their approach. As Kuhn himself attempted to understand certain movements in the history of science he concluded that scientific reasoning forms paradigms. There is nothing deterministic in forming hypotheses. Writing history is not just a matter of collecting facts and presenting inevitable conclusions or causal explanations.<sup>115</sup>

It is true that, for a long time, the theory of writing history centered on epistemological questions. Scholars asked questions such as, "How can we know about the past?" or "Is objective knowledge possible?" This changed in the 1970s along with the linguistic turn that also affected the theory of historical investigation. Scholars often regard Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1973) as the crucial monograph supporting a new narrative approach to history. As Fay describes it: "With this linguistic turn, the

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<sup>113</sup> Dahl holds explanatory power and fruitfulness as criteria for historical theories. Dahl, *Historiantutkimuksen metodidiopin peruspiirteitä*, 23–24.

<sup>114</sup> See Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments*, 222, 240–242. Stuhlmacher's work has more to do with theological content than history as such, though.

<sup>115</sup> Kuhn, *Structure*, 37–45.



topics of narration and representation replaced the law and explanation as burning issues of the theory and philosophy of history."<sup>116</sup>

The basic question in "reading" history is simple: do we impose an order on the past, or do we read an order that is already there?<sup>117</sup> Historicists believed that they were doing the latter, and their critics claimed that they were guilty of the former. Traditional scholars, in turn, claim that authors in the new linguistic movement are doing the former, but the supporters of a narratological view believe that they are in fact doing the latter. Where is the difference, then? White himself explains the situation in a later writing.

But in general there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.<sup>118</sup>

The basic difference, thus, concerns the deterministic ideal. Explanations of history are not just descriptions of what happened. Instead, writing history has narratological features: it implies selection, casting, and plotting. There is a story with a beginning and an end. Tasks and results, premises and conclusions. What is important here is that scholars are always dependent on their own contexts and premises. The personal way of creating historical "stories" is at least partly influenced by contemporary thought.<sup>119</sup> Nevertheless, the people existed, and events have taken place. Even though the plotting of history can be seen as anachronistic, every description of any event usually has the form of a story.

White himself probably supports a rather strong constructivist theory where the emphasis is on personal reconstruction. This, however, is not the primary premise of the linguistic approach. In the more cognitive tradition scholars believe in the active relation between thought and reality. Narrativity is seen as means to understand the nature of human events: "Narrative is not merely a possibly successful way of describing events; its

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<sup>116</sup> Fay, *History and Theory*, 2. Stegemann adds that White "has cast doubt on the epistemological character of the historical method." On this basis, historiography is at least partly based on the "preconditions of language." Stegemann, *Moving Beyond*, 224.

<sup>117</sup> Norman, *History and Theory*, 155.

<sup>118</sup> White, *History and Theory*, 16.

<sup>119</sup> Also Elton acknowledges this, even though he is not very keen on the narratological approach. Elton, *Practice of History*, 37: "Historians cannot exist in a vacuum; they live in the society of men, influence it whether they like it or not, and should therefore be conscious of what they are about."



structure inheres in the events themselves."<sup>120</sup> In addition to this, however, all explanatory narratives remain in the sphere of hypotheses.

Contemporary theory of history, metahistory if you like, has drifted far from the Rankean historicism according to which most twentieth century New Testament studies were written. Today, approaches vary. Some scholars emphasize the philosophy of science aspects, others speak of social methodologies. Linguistic approaches, in turn, vary as they do in other disciplines. Postmodernism and gender issues have entered the discussion as of the 2000s.<sup>121</sup> This highlights that Räsänen's—or Barr's or the post-Bultmannians'—historical investigation of the Bible no longer conforms to contemporary academic investigation of history. Even if other areas of theology follow the views accepted elsewhere in the academic community, this is not the case with the current historical investigation of the Bible. This is probably useful to bear in mind as Räsänen's views are assessed in their own context.<sup>122</sup>

Räsänen has no doubt attempted to answer similar questions, but he never makes a shift towards narrative reading. This is why also his hermeneutical program is directed by his understanding of historical study. As historical-critical investigation, for him, is the point of departure for all biblical interpretation, hermeneutical theory turns out to be just the reverse side of the coin. We can understand the nature of his interpretative theory only when seeing it as an *extension* of historical-critical investigation. A belief-system, for Räsänen, means individual people's personal interpretation of religious experiences. And what is more, he states that these beliefs are constructed in order to solve social problems that different crises create in the community.

In this respect, Räsänen remains a historicist and depends on a historical-critical theory deriving from the modern period. Compared with later hermeneutical theories we can see that Räsänen's view lacks the features of existentialist, phenomenological, structuralist, linguistic, narratological, or postmodern hermeneutics. Räsänen starts by rejecting the existentialist tradition, in his *Authority*, where he does not accept the Bultmannian dualism between *Entmythologisierung* and existential interpretation. As we saw, he demands *Entkerygmatisierung*. This

<sup>120</sup> Carr, *History and Theory*, 137.

<sup>121</sup> The collection *History and Theory* comprises articles on, for example, postmodernism, gender theories, objectivity, and even ethical reading (concerning the Holocaust).

<sup>122</sup> There is an interesting discussion about the nature of narratological history-writing in the field of biblical hermeneutics, and it will be addressed later in 6.7.

difference is so essential that it must be investigated more closely in the next chapter.<sup>123</sup>

Phenomenology could have been part of Räisänen's methodology because the leading monographs of the French poststructuralist phenomenology had been published by the 1960s when Räisänen began to write on the Bible and the Quran. But he shows no interests in that movement and never discusses Derrida or Barthes. The same is true of French structuralism. Räisänen does not use Greimas' structuralism and has no use for a methodology focusing on deep structures in a written text. In fact, Räisänen uses few linguistic tools apart from standard German exegesis. The analysis of his interest in the historical-critical methodology proves this beyond doubt. Räisänen has later adopted some principles from the poststructuralist sociology of knowledge theory but this did not alter his hermeneutical paradigm. This issue will be discussed in detail later.<sup>124</sup>

All this shows that Räisänen's hermeneutical theory of the chain of interpretation is mainly a product of the old, Reimarian historical criticism. Frei, who worried about the "eclipse of biblical narrative" in New Testament hermeneutics, as we saw, could direct his criticism towards Räisänen, too. Narrative has been abandoned and New Testament interpretation has turned into interpretation of different traditional layers. Hypotheses concerning these layers have replaced the text itself and, in the context of social approaches, a kind of "history of ideas" of different layers has replaced standard biblical scholarship. Historical investigation today, however, is clearly different. The understanding of Jesus' eschatological discourse or the explanation of his parables does not demand any materialist reduction before the proper meaning of the text is ventured. The third quest for the historical Jesus has proven that principles of studying history—or the historical Jesus—focus usually on constructive work that is able to create a plausible picture of Jesus' work and proclamation.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> For the dependence of recent New Testament theology on the modern, see especially Adam, *Making Sense*, 104–105. See also the discussion in 6.6. As we saw, Räisänen in his *Beyond* admits that, in historical investigation, the subject of research cannot be "wholly bracketed" out of the historical work. Stegemann sees this as a step forward from the previous historicist agenda. Stegemann, *Moving Beyond*, 228. One cannot be certain, however, that this would actually change Räisänen's hermeneutical model, dependent as it is on the strict version of historical criticism.

<sup>124</sup> See subchapter 2.2. below.

<sup>125</sup> This is especially true as regards the investigation of the historical Jesus, see Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, 236–248.

The difference between the old historicist investigation and new approaches is essential. There is no scientific demand today that Messianic features or miraculous stories be excluded from the constructive work based on some rationalist criterion of dissimilarity.<sup>126</sup> The stories as such may be historically valid, whatever a modern scholar thinks of their factual plausibility in the original historical situation. Historical authenticity of a story differs from the historical authenticity of an event. To say it as plainly as possible: a critical scholar must even accept the possibility of a lie in a particular historical situation—if the source presents it—without claiming that someone else has invented the same lie afterwards. Sources are primary, not the rationalist mind of the scholar. Any argument against one source should be justified by a better and more trustworthy source outside the first.

The second question we posed above asks whether there is a proper method available for investigating theology or religion? There are two important but distinct issues in this area. First of all, we need to reopen the question about the criteria of historical study. Only after this it is possible to proceed to the second issue and assess the premises and preconditions for investigating religion itself.

Over the years, the discussion about criteria has gone in a more fruitful direction. Even common sense attests that the use of the criterion of dissimilarity implies a vast amount of information. Such a criterion implies that the scholar already knows in advance what Jesus' real teaching is, and how the post-Easter theology differs from it. This must be so because the scholar has set out to make a distinction between different lines of theological thought. If someone is going to compare Jesus' teaching with that of the apostolic community, he must have some kind of understanding of its content as he starts his reasoning.

This leads to a difficult theoretical problem. The Reimarian approach presents its criteria as indicators of a relation. Something is considered *dissimilar* to something else. To assess a text and present propositions about

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<sup>126</sup> What does this mean for the fair play argument Räisänen has championed? Should the historian think that, for instance, the miraculous events in Muhammad's life ought to be considered in the same way? The theoretical answer is simply: yes. The authors of these stories believed that such events were true. It was part of their belief-system. The content of a story must not alter the historical evaluation of it. Gospel narratives about Jesus reflect a strong conviction that Jesus performed miracles and preached with Messianic enthusiasm. One may personally suspect the reality of some of the events described but this does not mean that a reductionist reading would make a better historical study or help one understand particular texts better.

its value means comparison, but in this case it is not at all clear what elements are being compared. It is true that any assessment is dependent on a *relation* between two different things, because a comparison cannot be done without a relation. But here lies also the heart of the problem. If the so-called criterion already expresses a relation, be it dissimilarity or coherence, it really is not a criterion in a scientific sense. It does not yet provide a norm—a “Maßstab” as Bultmann said—for the comparison. Therefore, scholars can discover the real norm to which Jesus’ teaching is in fact compared only afterwards.

During the age of axiomatic positivism, scholars often used criteria that indicated merely a relation. This was popular because they believed that reason itself already dictated true observation and its interpretation. Difference, like in this case, was not dependent on a comparison, but it was considered a true criterion that could be used as such. A belief in the omnipotence of scientific research supported this kind of attitude. The *different* part of the comparison was already known in advance. In biblical studies it usually meant that all scholars assumed that the supernatural Messianic figure could never have been a historical figure. All this changed after the death of inductivism. We do not need to remain on an abstract level in this question though. A practical example will show the nature of the problem.

Why can’t a relation be considered a criterion? The answer is simple: because the relation itself cannot be a criterion for only one of its objects. Relation means that one object is compared with another. Nothing is “dissimilar” in itself. Therefore, the solution is as simple as the basic problem. The real criterion is the view to which Jesus’ teaching is compared. In other words, in Reimarus’ inferences, and in Bultmann’s form criticism, the actual criterion is the scholar’s own construction of the historical Jesus. And its counterpoint is a reconstruction of the so-called kerygmatic Christ of the Christian community. R.S. Barbour has noted this several decades ago, as he says:

There is no way of escape from the so-called “hermeneutical circle”—the understanding of a whole from its parts, and of the parts in the light of the whole. For the use of the criterion of dissimilarity as a basic tool is not just a heuristic method, as seems to be supposed, but it is in itself the adoption of an hypothesis about the historical Jesus and his relation to the early tradition.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Barbour, *Criticism*, 19.

If the scholar decides in the first phase of his investigation that a certain Jesus-word cannot be authentic, he will classify and assess Gospel material according to this prejudiced view. This analysis leads to a conclusion that the Bultmannian or form critical view of the historical Jesus is in fact a theory. From the beginning it has been constructed from the premises that derive from as far back as Reimarus and Stauss and which Bultmann himself developed in his history-of-religion application of the approach. The Christ of faith became a norm according to which Gospel material was assessed. We could say that this was their way of providing another construction of the historical Jesus—but this would not be completely true. The Bultmannian tradition is too well known for its frustration in the “first quest” for the historical Jesus.

All the criticism considered, the result of the so-called historical-critical investigation of the historical Jesus—this now meaning investigation where strict criteria have been applied—has turned out to be quite the opposite of the original intention of the study. After the diligent sifting of the material, the investigation has ended up in frustration. It has not been able to provide a picture of a “historical” Jesus whose life can be more or less accurately described decently and whose theological intention can be explained understandably. Instead, the *critical investigation resulted in a picture of an “unhistorical” Jesus who had been completely separated from history*. The features according to which his identity was defined were of no use in forming any consistent vision of an influential historical figure. Klaus Haacker has summarized the above mentioned problems in a difficult paradox:

If one separates all Jewish and Christian elements out of the Jesus-tradition, this does not lead to a historically justified conception of Jesus but to a picture that even beforehand is destined to be unhistorical. The work does not result in a “Jesus of history” (since Jesus was Jewish!) but in a Christological abstraction.<sup>128</sup>

Such problems naturally gave rise to the third quest towards the end of the twentieth century. A completely new attempt to construct a plausible picture of Jesus was needed. Most scholars in the new movement rejected the premises of the two previous quests as well as the criteria discussed above.

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<sup>128</sup> Haacker, *Wissenschaft*, 76.

The discussion was later inspired by Theissen and Winter's *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (original in German 1997),<sup>129</sup> and soon a collection edited by Chilton and Evans followed, called *Authenticating the Words of Jesus* (1998).<sup>130</sup> After these large compilations Stanley E. Porter published a whole monograph on the subject *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research* (2000). According to Porter several different criteria have lately been under discussion. He assumes that the old criteria produced by form criticism play a minor role in contemporary discussion. Everything changed with the "third quest." He discusses all the traditional criteria but refers also to new ones, such as the criterion of Semitic language phenomena, the criterion of embarrassment, the criterion of rejection and execution, and the criterion of historical plausibility.<sup>131</sup>

Porter notes that form criticism directed the emergence of the earliest criteria. This is also why the criteria are dependent on it and not very useful outside it. The criterion of coherence is rather useless because it just reiterates what the criterion of dissimilarity has shown: stories that resemble confirmed, authentic stories are also to be considered authentic. The criterion of multiple attestation is quite difficult to apply because the sources themselves are defined by claiming that similar material cannot be found elsewhere.

The criterion of embarrassment, originally used by Käsemann but applied by several other scholars, speaks of embarrassing language that offends hearers. According to Porter, using it is difficult since it cannot be applied to many passages, not to mention its inappropriateness in constructive work. Porter, thus, writes in a new situation where scholars have to solve the former problem of the "unhistorical Jesus" of the historicist era.

It would indeed be an odd portrait of Jesus, if all that he is recorded as doing or saying were things embarrassing to the early Church. Another limitation

<sup>129</sup> Theissen and Winter, *Plausible Jesus*.

<sup>130</sup> Chilton and Evans, *Words of Jesus*.

<sup>131</sup> See especially Porter, *Criteria*, 70, 77, 82, 102, 116, and 210. He mentions criteria such as (1) criterion of double dissimilarity, (2) criterion of least distinctiveness, (3) criterion of coherence and consistency, (4) criterion of multiple attestation, (5) criterion of Semitic language phenomena, (6) criterion of embarrassment, (7) criterion of rejection and execution, (8) criterion of historical plausibility, (9) criterion of textual variants, (10) criterion of discourse features.

of this criterion is that determining what might have been embarrassing to the early Church is also very difficult.<sup>132</sup>

But then for the investigation religion as such, Räsänen has suggested a science of religion methodology where just a few general features of religion are assessed (which kind of precepts must one follow; how will one be saved). His theory of the chain of interpretation attempts then to sort out the complex history of ideas that takes place in the course of human history. In all this he is not interested in texts themselves or the narrative. Meaning, for Räsänen, is not dependent on the semantic structure of the sources.

After the linguistic turn in methodologies, narratology and semiotics have consolidated their investigative position of ancient texts, as have rhetoric and reception criticism. Any issue concerning content and especially theology today must deal with these approaches. Scholars hardly speak of particular "methods" any more because the word belongs to rationalist discourse.<sup>133</sup> It usually denotes naturalist methods that use measurability and causality as their main tools. The investigation of human products, especially texts, is no longer interested in such an approach but rather focuses on identification, understanding and communication. This is why a number of scholars speak only about readings and interpretations. Hypothetical theories are useful if they are able to communicate their views and principles and can stand the scrutiny of the scholarly community.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Porter, *Criteria*, 109. Holmén still accepts this criterion (with Breech, Meier, and Evans) but reinterprets it as a "special case" of the "dissimilarity test" he has defined. In his opinion, it can confirm authenticity "when a tradition's dissimilarity to Christianity is radical enough to have supposedly caused 'embarrassment'." Holmén, *Words of Jesus*, 75. In this case scholars apparently speak of a very narrow critical minimum of words, and the criterion is hardly useful as far as the entire corpus of texts is considered.

<sup>133</sup> See especially Vander Stichele in the collection that discusses Räsänen's approaches. Stichele questions Räsänen's dependence on historical criticism and asks whether the latter should attempt to find a way "Beyond Historical-Criticism?" as one heading in her article states. Stichele does not agree with how Räsänen accepts Gabler's views: "Another assumption pertains to the underlying view of science, which is indebted to Enlightenment thought and values, and can be described as inductivist and positivist." Stichele, *Moving Beyond*, 310, 334. In the same collection Räsänen answers Stichele and states that despite all the changes that may be assessed as useful and relevant, "Still, historical criticism remains indispensable, *if* one asks historical questions." Räsänen, *Moving Beyond*, 411.

<sup>134</sup> These are the reasons why I would go farther than Balla in questioning the legitimization of historical critical methodology. Balla himself noted that Stuhlmacher already in the 1970s stated that the Troeltschean approach to history should be "opened up and developed." See Balla, *Challenges*. 14–15. It is not only the nature and purpose of historicism,



As Räisänen's theory lacks interest in narratology it fails to fulfill the aims he himself has proposed in the preliminary conditions of the theory. He speaks about tradition and its new interpretation but, in practice, he does not really believe that any new interpretation could be significant. Usually Räisänen just speaks about conflicts and the rejection of previous views: the apostles reject Jesus' eschatology, and Paul rejects the nomistic views of Jewish-Christian teachers. Re-interpretation in Räisänen's theory usually leads to appropriation and negation.

For Räisänen, interpretation means presenting straightforward claims. He does not speak about the gentle moulding of tradition or enriching previous views. His examples treat ideological conflicts. Can this serve as "interpretation?" This is an important theoretical question. It is not just a matter of terminology. One needs to think about what kind of categories suit particular practical changes best. There is an essential difference between adoption, adaptation and appropriation. One may adopt previous tradition by rewording similar ideas but accepting the concepts as they are. In New Testament Christology this is quite common, for instance in descriptions of Jesus' death and the meaning of the cross. Adaptation means that theological themes taken from the tradition are applied in a new context where they receive new color but maintain their conceptual structure.

Appropriation is something else. It approaches what Räisänen has stated about the reformulation of tradition in a conflict situation. Räisänen describes historical events where a fight against opponents culminates in their being denigrated—and this creates new symbols that oppose old conceptions in the symbolic universe. In his *Authority* Räisänen provides examples where the theological stance changes essentially. He mentions abandoning the idea of Jesus' imminent return and describes how later generations oppose Jewish-Christian adoptianism and replace it with high Christology. His examples lead to a theological antagonism with exclusivist Christomonism that, despite all the "historical" facts Räisänen has found, still prevails in New Testament theology. All this, for Räisänen himself and his colleague Gilkey, represents a battle between orthodoxy and

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however, that needs revisioning. In the 2000s we speak about a significant epistemological shift after which Troeltschean principles are no longer useful in the discussion. As we have stated throughout the analysis, the basic "methods" of historical criticism, such as form criticism, have been called into question and mostly abandoned in contemporary research.



liberal views—not only in their own scholarly community but in the early Church, as well.

Even a quick glimpse of Räisänen's theory shows that he has discussed only some of the important functions that need to be taken into account in an interpretation theory. He does treat questions of historical context and social or sociological issues. Even though he tends to use just the historicist results, he still mentions these matters. He neglects philosophical questions, though. Räisänen writes as if philosophical issues do not affect interpretation. In this respect his scientism prevents him from observing the ideological commitments that affect reasoning in theological issues. Likewise literary questions and linguistic perspectives play a secondary role to historical questions—to say nothing of narratology and rhetoric as we noted above. From the perspective of the contemporary discussion of hermeneutics, the scope of Räisänen's interpretation theory is rather narrow.<sup>135</sup>

Summarizing the discussion above we can say that, after the “eclipse of narrative” many scholars have shifted the focus back onto the story itself. This is why the methodology for investigating the theological content of the writings, as well as the “religion” of the authors, has been close to narratology in its various forms. As we shall see later in the chapters dealing with the methodology of New Testament theology, textual theories and linguistic approaches have gained ground in the investigation of textual content. In addition to narratology, the tools include structural analysis, rhetorical criticism, semiotics, and reception criticism, to name a few.

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<sup>135</sup> For the discussion, see Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 248–251.

## CHAPTER THREE

### IN THE SHADOW OF WEBER: RELIGION AS CULTURE—CULTURE AS RELIGION

Räisänen's immanent approach, supported by his insistence on demythologizing and his reluctance to accept any idea of a divine kerygma, necessarily puts emphasis on human behavior. The "panorama of natural religion," proclaimed in the *Authority*, longs for a detailed theory that would not only be able to explain the nature of religion but, more importantly, the genesis and construction of religious beliefs. In the 1980s, Räisänen found his answer in sociology. He joined forces with Peter Berger and his Weberian tradition. Here Räisänen no longer strayed from the mainstream—if in fact he was ever in it in his opposition to the Bultmannian current. New Testament scholars seldom refer to Berger whose theory Räisänen uses at length. Berger, originally a theologian himself, is best known in the spheres of the science of religion and sociology of religion. His sociology of knowledge has been used to explain the basic nature of religion, and Räisänen, too, uses it when explaining his chain of interpretation from a theoretical point of view. Roots go deep, though. Standard sociology was never indifferent to religion and theology—instead, Weber, Durkheim and their followers wrote extensively on these issues. In fact, early sociology of religion can be seen as the cradle of the modern science of religion. Post-Bultmannian theological hermeneutics is indeed indebted to sociological explanations but the actual theory itself becomes influential through Berger's work.<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.1. *Weber on the Sociology of Religion*

Already in his early works Räisänen was interested in the science of religion and, as one recalls the methods used in that field in the 1970s, sociology. His hermeneutical theory also focused on social phenomena. Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> An overview on Berger's theories has been offered in the collection *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion* (edited by Linda Woodhead). There is also an informative presentation in Connolly's *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, see pp. 204–206.

it is no wonder that later, when developing his hermeneutical theory and working on its details, Räsänen became more involved with sociology.

In his *Beyond New Testament Theology* Räsänen presents a theoretical justification for his hermeneutical approach. One of the most important sources for his thinking, according to this book, is Peter Berger's hermeneutical theory of sociology: "I join those exegetes who have recently drawn on the sociology of knowledge as developed and applied to the study of religion by Peter Berger in particular."<sup>2</sup> These scholars first provided some important terminology. "Berger's (and Thomas Luckmann's) concept of the 'symbolic universe' seems extremely helpful, along with Berger's emphasis on the dialectic between experience and interpretation."<sup>3</sup> For Räsänen, Berger's theory is a useful tool for investigating how people understand their "fundamental experiences." This view came as a welcomed relief since already since his early writings Räsänen had struggled with the problems of defining experience.<sup>4</sup> Now the sociology of knowledge provided a solution.

Sociology had been applied in the investigation of religion long before Berger made it an integral part of subject. It belongs in fact to the seven essential approaches for studying religion.<sup>5</sup> Early sociological theories suggest several different and even contradictory explanations of the relation between society and religion. The main difference lies between Durkheim and Weber, but Marx has greatly influenced these traditions.

Whereas Durkheim emphasized the role of religion in integrating society, Weber seemed to develop a theory which showed that religion is a phenomenon *sui generis* which influenced economic and social evolution rather than being influenced by the general development.<sup>6</sup>

Durkheim provided a functionalist explanation, which is of minor importance here because it has mainly affected Thomas Luckmann, the scholar

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<sup>2</sup> Räsänen uses four books by Berger, one of these written with Thomas Luckmann. This was the first one, and probably the most famous, was *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967). The other three books are *The Social Reality of Religion* (1969), *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (1970), and *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (1980). There is no reciprocal mention, however. Berger never refers to Räsänen in these works.

<sup>3</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, xvii.

<sup>4</sup> See the discussion on the defining of experience in 2.5.

<sup>5</sup> For these approaches, see the collection edited by Peter Connolly, *Approaches*, v, especially pp. 193–225. The work presents essays on anthropological, feminist, phenomenological, philosophical, psychological, sociological, and theological approaches.

<sup>6</sup> See Kehrler and Hardin, *Contemporary Approaches II*, 163.

who wrote about the sociology of knowledge in collaboration with Berger. For Durkheim religion is “a source of social and moral order, binding the members of society to a common social project.”<sup>7</sup> Weber, who has influenced Berger, appears to have been more interested in the dialectical relationship between religious ideas and their social environment. He did build on Marx when he accepted religion, basically, as a social product, but he also assumed that religious movements can have social and economic consequences. Thus, there are several different premises behind these explanations. “While Marx was concerned with religion as a social smoke-screen and Weber with religion as a social starter-motor, Durkheim is primarily concerned with religion as a form of social cement.”<sup>8</sup>

In many respects, Weber already departed from Marx for whom religion as “an agent of social order” often legitimated “the unjust and harsh rule of feudal lords.” As religion made the origin of oppression ostensibly mystical, it simply confirmed the rights of the rulers. But Weber no longer assumed that religion legitimates only negative elements. For Weber, religion is a “source of ideas and practices which *transcends* the immanent social world in independent and unpredictable ways.”<sup>9</sup> Weber thus develops the Marxian idea of a superstructure: religion has the nature of an ideology.

Weber in fact proceeded in a more textualist direction. Religion, as an ideology that is related to social phenomena, is mainly a matter of religious language. He emphasizes this feature already in the opening words of his book *The Sociology of Religion* (translated and printed in his *Economy and Society*). Even though, in light of later developments, Weberian readings are more important here than the actual works that he wrote, this passage is very illuminating.

The external courses of religious behavior are so diverse that an understanding of this behavior can only be achieved from the viewpoint of the subjective experiences, ideas, and purposes of the individuals concerned—in short, from the viewpoint of the religious behavior’s “meaning” (*Sinn*).<sup>10</sup>

Weber’s approach is hermeneutical. There is an interplay between experience, behavior, and meaning. Meaning is especially important for his theory so he presents thorough analyses of religious meanings and doctrines

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<sup>7</sup> Northcott, *Approaches*, 196.

<sup>8</sup> Hill, *Contemporary Approaches II*, 106.

<sup>9</sup> Northcott, *Approaches*, 198–199; italics mine.

<sup>10</sup> Weber in his *Sociology of Religion*, see *Economy and Society*, 399.

in his book. He discusses beliefs about God, explanations of evil, theodicies, as well as stories of salvation.

For Weber, religious systems provided that matrix of meaning by which social systems emerge and change, and through which they can be interpreted. The social process itself, however, does not exhaust religion's meaning. Religion's matrix is in some sense trans-historical, and includes a socially transcendent dimension, though participation in this religious dimension of the human historical process is not inevitable.<sup>11</sup>

As a German scholar Weber was, of course, a naturalist, and this affected his world view. His treatment of myths and transcendental reality was similar to that of other rationalists. Religion and religious language are limited due to their supernatural object. Personal experiences are real but their referential objects are beyond the scope of human language. Since one cannot speak of gods and demons with everyday language, supernatural existence is "accessible only through the mediation of symbols and meanings."<sup>12</sup> Religious language, for Weber, is a system of symbols that have no real referential object.

Marx's influence, as noted, can be seen especially in Weber's idea that religious language is closely related to social reality. With his dichotomy between base and superstructure (or substructure and superstructure) Marx claimed that the base (forces of production) is given ideological justification by a particular superstructure (law, morality, religion). Weber is then inclined to think that ideology or religion legitimates certain aspects of social reality. What happens here is that religion is held to be "rationalist," i.e. that it provides primarily an explanation of the world. Religion does *influence*, and it has *consequences* but, essentially, it is a mental structure.

In practice Weber discusses several particular issues. One of the most important of these is theodicy. According to Weber, there is an existential contradiction in life between the glory of the majestic divinity and the melancholic course of ordinary life: "even a meaningful world order that is impersonal and super-theistic must face the problem of the world's imperfections."<sup>13</sup> This, then, leads to the full-grown problem of theodicy, whose definition closely mirrors that of the philosophy of religion:

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<sup>11</sup> Lott, *Vision*, 162.

<sup>12</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 404.

<sup>13</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 519.

But the more the development tends toward the conception of a transcendent unitary god who is universal, the more there arises the problem of how the extraordinary power of such a god may be reconciled with the imperfection of the world that he has created and rules over.<sup>14</sup>

According to Weber, this problem can be solved by proposing different answers, for instance a messianic expectation, retribution, or predestination. One could say that, for Weber, the hermeneutics of religion has a narratological nature. Some religions create stories of cosmic dualism, others prefer karma and rebirth. What is important is that each solution implies different social realities and different consequences within the community's social life.

Religion, for Weber, is a source of social change, as Northcott says. Weber also believes, however, that "religion would gradually fade in social significance as a consequence of rationalization of modern social and economic organization."<sup>15</sup> Weber follows Comte in his understanding of the development of Western thought. According to the original Kantian principle, religion as such (universal religion) is based on the idea of God as a *summum bonum* who legitimates morality and justifies ethical life. In Kantian eschatology, however, religion will gradually become useless and historical religions will vanish, as the triumphant ethical community takes control. In the age of positivism, this evolutionary scheme changed into a story about the liberation of reason, as it has been called. Myths will be deconstructed and magic will be abandoned; religious explanations will turn out to be false pre-critical metaphysics; and critical positivist knowledge will be made the basis on which both anthropology and the new world view will be grounded.

Weber belongs to the timeless community of scholars who cherish such a victory of pure reason. In the *Economy and Society* his presentation implies a transition from a mystical or theological phase to a rational positivist phase. For instance his treatment of "Bases of Legitimacy" for a social order is based on such a development, as are his ponderings on the use of force in "Political and Hierocratic Organizations." And as one might expect, an integral part of his argument covers theocratic and secular law in his *Sociology of Law* (also in the same translation) and the general conditions of legal formalism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 519.

<sup>15</sup> Northcott, *Approaches*, 199.

<sup>16</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 21, 33, 37–38, 54–56, 809–812.

As Milbank notes, Weber in his hermeneutics of cultural evolution considers the impact of the “irrational.” “But just as for Comte, the major problem for Weber is the role, in the emergence of reason, of the irrational, and primarily of religion.”<sup>17</sup> As Weber himself states in the beginning of his *Protestant Ethic*, there is a line of development in Western civilization that has universal significance and value.<sup>18</sup> Primitive religions, for Weber, belong to an early “magical” phase in the development of human thought and social reflection. Weber oscillates between Kant and Nietzsche when describing how Christianity should be placed in this evolutionary pattern. It is no longer a magical religion and, therefore, it must be defined as a universalist religion that demands an inner reorientation towards a transcendent goal. Schroeder assumes that Weber follows Nietzsche closely here. “The transition to universalist religion is as radical in Weber’s writings as in Nietzsche’s. In the first place, Judaeo-Christianity is seen as creating an all-encompassing world-view that accounts for suffering and injustice in the world—a theodicy.”<sup>19</sup>

This, however, is just part of the story. The development of Western thought would evolve further. As we know, Kant expected “historical” religions to fade away as civilized society developed into a responsible ethical community. Nietzsche contrasted the new phase with Christian slave morality and awaited the “time of great noon” when the new society would see the light. Weber, in turn, closes his *Protestant Ethic* by prophesizing—hesitatingly though—that finally the “iron cage” (the spirit of capitalism) might at last be opened.<sup>20</sup>

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance.<sup>21</sup>

In this respect, Weber builds his sociology of religion on Comtean evolutionism.<sup>22</sup> His treatment of Christian faith and Christian history

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<sup>17</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 92.

<sup>18</sup> Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Schroeder, *Rationality and Modernity*, 209. According to Schroeder, Weber follows Nietzsche completely in contrasting Christian tradition with the age of reason.

<sup>20</sup> Schroeder, *Rationality and Modernity*, 220.

<sup>21</sup> Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 182.

<sup>22</sup> For the idea of the rationalization of culture in Weber’s sociology, see Roth, *Rationality and Modernity*, 80–82.

is governed by the evolutionary pattern that already as such provides value-judgments about religion itself. Milbank has noted this:

But just as for Comte, the major problem for Weber is the role, in the emergence of reason, of the irrational, and primarily of religion. Like Comte also, Weber responds by erecting a three-phase theory of historical becoming: there is a first, 'magical' phase; a second phase of the great salvation-religions; and a third, modern, secular phase.<sup>23</sup>

Milbank states that sociology gradually became the guiding light for liberal hermeneutics in western Churches. According to Milbank's analysis, Weber's view of cultural evolution identified theological interpretations as primitive attempts to understand reality. Since the days of the Enlightenment "positive" knowledge, scientific knowledge, is the only standard or norm of truth that can be acknowledged. This mindset gradually seeped into Christian theology so that theological statements have been reduced to secular interpretations. In liberal theology, thus, Weber's evolutionary formula has been the basis for a real liberal Protestant meta-narrative according to which theology has been assessed. "The history of the west is turned into the always-coming-to-be of liberal protestantism [*sic*] or its secular aftermath, and this means precisely the always-coming-to-be of Weber's and Troeltsch's methodology, their instrument of investigation."<sup>24</sup> One early parallel with this can be found in Reimarus' tradition where biblical interpretation has been understood as the always-coming-to-be of rationalist Deism. If Reimarus, Weber, and their followers are right, Christianity should gradually develop into a liberal theology with a secular ideology searching for Jesus' original political or ethical program—and should gradually fade away as secularism comes to prevail.

Consistent with these ideas, Weber also uses the hermeneutical pattern when explaining the changes in European religious history in his *The Protestant Ethic*. When the Puritans rejected magical superstition, they symbolized the shift from magical to metaphysical. The capitalist world, however, has proceeded to the next phase: rationalist pragmatism has been developed to such a degree that society no longer upholds religious values, and profit dictates the aspirations of the community.<sup>25</sup>

Weberian sociology is hermeneutical and develops in textualist direction. Religion is a mental structure. It is mainly a matter of ideology based

<sup>23</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 92.

<sup>24</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 93.

<sup>25</sup> Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 168, 182–183.



on metaphysics. Religion provides a system of meaning for social systems. It is true that, according to Weber, these metaphysical belief-systems will gradually dissipate, but the dissipation is at least in part a result of the inner development of religion itself. Rationalization will result in demythologizing and Western culture itself will develop such that reason will dominate the interpretation of reality, especially human reality. In the age of positivism, religion no longer provides answers for the crucial questions of life and lifestyle. For Weber, secularization is an inevitable process aiming at the liberation of reason from the bondage of religion's mythical and metaphysical ideology. Later such ideas heavily influenced the sociology of religion.

### 3.2. *Berger and the Genesis of the Sociology of Knowledge*

Peter Berger builds on Weberian sociology. This means that both as a theologian and a sociologist he is interested in language and meaning. As Räsänen noted above, Berger wishes to explain the dialectic between experience and interpretation. On the one hand, this is a matter of knowledge because religion, in this case, is considered a mental system of beliefs and explanations. On the other hand, it is also a matter of sociology, because the theory assumes that all meanings are created in terms of human experience. The link to Weberian sociology is evident. As Weber himself put it, supernatural existence is accessible to us "only through the mediation of symbols and meanings."<sup>26</sup>

Berger's personal development both as a theologian and a sociologist reveals several important factors behind his theory. As Dorrien remarks, he started as a Barthian scholar leaning on neo-orthodoxy. Berger's early attitude towards the defining of religion was based on a strict polarization: a religion grounded on God's divine act finds no points of contact with the world as it stands. It is not the church's mission to provide a basis for morality or social order. The gospel concerns heavenly things. This led to the concept of "religionless Christianity." Along with Bonhoeffer, Berger proclaimed that secularization is a logical consequence of pure faith. This,

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<sup>26</sup> Berger's great significance for Räsänen's hermeneutics may be difficult to detect on the basis of *Beyond New Testament Theology* alone. Berger appears in just one subchapter and is thus placed among several other scholars. The book, however, is based on Räsänen's Finnish articles. Of these, the one whose English title reads "Experience as a key concept of biblical interpretation" focuses on Berger and his sociology of knowledge; see Räsänen, *TAik* 92 (1987) 377–390.

however, also justifies the mission. Since God is located completely outside this world, the church is commissioned to call the corrupted views of the modern world into question.<sup>27</sup>

In his early years Berger also applied such views to sociology. Originally, there is in fact a certain dialectical tone in Berger's sociology, deriving probably from the Marxist current in Weberian theory.<sup>28</sup> In many senses, human beings are conceived as products of their society. At the same time, however, the system of meanings changes the society itself and its communal life. Berger no longer accepts the simplistic view according to which the human subject is merely a product of his or her social environment. In the *Invitation to Sociology* (1963) Berger suggests that such a view (on sociology) may even reinforce "bad faith" as it absolutizes the extant social situation. A properly theological view, he says, must question the *status quo* and combat the fatalistic views of some traditional theories.<sup>29</sup>

Even though sociology gradually begins to change Berger's views on religion, some traits of neo-orthodoxy can still be found in Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). In general, the work presents a Weberian approach to the factuality of meanings and wants to liberate scholars from the view that people are merely prisoners of society.<sup>30</sup> As far as religion is concerned, Berger's theory appears to build not only on Weber, but also on Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade—not to mention Bultmann.<sup>31</sup> Religion still has a *sui generis* nature here, at least in some respect. For the young Berger, religious experience as such is genuine.

Berger's later situation starts to change his premises, though, and creates some problems in his theory. The desacralized Weberian reduction of religion is somewhat incompatible with Otto's theory of the numinous. In *The Social Reality of Religion* Berger attempts to balance these two views and often says that religious symbols grow out of a reaction to experiencing some "awesome power." This would cause problems for

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<sup>27</sup> Dorrien, *Study of Religion*, 29. "Following Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, Berger argued that genuine biblical faith is profoundly secularizing. 'By denuding the cosmos of its divinity and placing God totally beyond its confines, the biblical tradition prepared the way for the process we now call secularization,' he explained."

<sup>28</sup> See the discussion on Marx's influence in Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 18.

<sup>29</sup> See Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, 164–167. Dorrien, *Study of Religion*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> To be precise, of these two only Berger is Weberian, and towards the end of the book the authors remark that they have shown how "the theoretical positions of Weber and Durkheim can be combined in a comprehensive theory of social action." Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 207. This means that, as far as Berger's views are concerned, the ideas of this book need to be compared with Berger's other writings.

<sup>31</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 127–128, see also 227 fn. 88, and 228 fn. 89.

Räisänen since, as we have seen, he rejects Otto's theory completely. We will return to this issue later.<sup>32</sup>

Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. Put differently, religion is cosmization in a sacred mode. By sacred I mean here a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience.<sup>33</sup>

Sociology treats the phenomenon of religion according to its own immanent premises but, according to Berger's Barthian understanding, God is still assumed to exist beyond visible reality. Nevertheless, Berger ultimately opts for "human" sociology. Even though he speaks about the role of the numinous, his theory becomes social. It may not be completely consistent, but this is what happens in his theory. Berger starts to call the theological expressions of religious experiences "alienated projections."<sup>34</sup> As Räisänen later takes this idea further he probably corrects Berger's ambivalence by suggesting a more secularized interpretation. A similar development can already be found in Berger's writings, though. Whatever the experience, the "religious" reaction is but a "human enterprise." This is how religion becomes a closed system.

Human beings, in the course of their externalization, project their meanings into the universe around them. These projections are objectivated in the common worlds of human societies. The "objectivity" of religious meanings is *produced* objectivity, that is, religious meanings are objectivated projections. It follows that, insofar as these meanings imply an overwhelming sense of otherness, they may be described as *alienated projections*.<sup>35</sup>

The terminology in the quotation above calls for an explanation. In his *Sacred Canopy* (1967) Berger explicates his Weberian dialectics of the social world. It can well be seen as Berger's own theoretical justification for the book *The Social Construction of Reality*. For him, the dialectics in question concern a three-dimensional process where externalization, objectivation, and internalization follow each other organically.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Otto and Eliade still wished to maintain the reality of the numinous in their theory. For them, a sociological reduction was unnecessary. In practice, however, their explanation is sociological as well. In this respect Berger is consistent enough when using them in his thinking. Problems start with Räisänen who pointedly takes a step back from their views. For Berger and Otto, see Berger, *Rumour of Angels*, 14–15; *Heretical Imperative*, 45.

<sup>33</sup> Berger, *Religion*, 26.

<sup>34</sup> Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 89; see also Lott, *Vision*, 169.

<sup>35</sup> Berger, *Religion*, 89.

<sup>36</sup> These concepts appear already in Berger-Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 70–79; but see especially Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 4–5.

(1) Externalization, for Berger, is a process in which human beings construct their system of meanings. As he says, it is a process of continuous “outpouring” of human subjectivity producing a world of meaning. Weberian influence is clear here: interpreting experience provides meanings that then are able to change the society. “It is through externalization that society is a human product.”<sup>37</sup>

(2) Objectivation then follows because it is the process by which the product or “construct” becomes the actual system of meanings. In the life of the society, it becomes an independent object. For Berger, it is “a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves.” One example of such a construction is the symbolic world that Berger developed in his earlier work, *The Social Construction of Reality*.<sup>38</sup>

(3) Internalization, finally, is the reappropriation by people of this same reality. It is the process by which the constructed world (such as social institutions or cultural products) are experienced as “subjectively real”: “The institutional programs set up by society are subjectively real as attitudes, motives and life projects.”<sup>39</sup>

This is Berger’s new dialectical correction of the standard Marxist view of society and its dynamics. “In this scheme, society is created through externalisation, it becomes an apprehended reality through objectivation, and the producing human subject becomes a product of society through internalisation.”<sup>40</sup> Human beings are not merely products of their society. They also constantly construct a system of meanings that moulds and reforms human beings. Ideology, in this sense, is a social fact.

Berger’s view is quite obviously related to Räsänen’s hermeneutics even though they spring from completely different roots. Already in 1972 Räsänen suggested that interpretations of personal experience produce theological concepts and these, in turn, affect the believing community

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<sup>37</sup> A short description is given in Berger, *Religion*, 4: “Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical and the mental activity of men. Objectivation is the attainment by the products of this activity (again both physical and mental) of a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalization is the reappropriation by men of this same reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness.” For the analysis, cf. Lott, *Vision*, 166–167.

<sup>38</sup> Berger, *Religion*, 4; cf. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 4–5.

<sup>39</sup> Berger, *Religion*, 17.

<sup>40</sup> A description by Dorrien, *Study of Religion*, 31. Berger’s standard expression reads as follows: “Society is a product of man. [...] Yet it may also be stated that man is a product of society.” Berger, *Religion*, 3.

that is always bound to a particular tradition. Berger even makes an analogy to the “chain of interpretation” as he states that, in internalization, reappropriation transforms ideas “once again from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness.” Human thought and human culture—as well as theology—develops in a chain.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, Berger introduces the concept of *nomos*, a normative rule or “sacral order,” as he says, that entails a “transcendence of individuality.”<sup>42</sup> As experience in this theory *means* something special, Weberian symbols and “meaning-constructs” become now a sacred cosmos with which one can control reality. “The socially constructed world was most importantly an ‘ordering of experience’ in which a meaningful order (or *nomos*) was imposed upon the experiences and meanings of human subjects.”<sup>43</sup> *Nomos* can be taken as a development of Weber’s understanding of religion as a matrix of meaning that provides a mental structure capable of changing social systems. “Every *nomos* confronts the individual as a meaningful reality that comprehends him and all his experiences.”<sup>44</sup>

This premise corresponds with Berger’s phenomenological epistemology: “The sociology of knowledge understands human reality as socially constructed reality.”<sup>45</sup> If anything, for Berger, is to have meaning, this meaning must be the result of externalization. He holds that symbolic reality, conceptions, ideologies (as well as theologies), and all meanings are socially conditioned.

What remains sociologically essential is the recognition that all symbolic universes and all legitimations are human products; their existence has its base in the lives of concrete individuals, and has no empirical status apart from these lives.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Berger, *Religion*, 4. Already in the *Social Construction*, Berger (with Luckmann) states that “the relationship between ideas and their sustaining social processes is always a dialectical one.” As ideas are developed, the process produces a chain. But there is also a dialectic between legitimation and innovation: “It is correct to say that theories are concocted in order to legitimate already existing social institutions. But it also happens that social institutions are changed in order to bring them into conformity with already existing theories, that is, to make them more ‘legitimate’. The experts in legitimation may operate as theoretical justifiers of the *status quo*; they may also appear as revolutionary ideologists.” Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 145.

<sup>42</sup> Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 53–54. Lott, *Vision*, 166–167.

<sup>43</sup> Dorrien, *Study of Religion*, 32.

<sup>44</sup> Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 54.

<sup>45</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 210–211.

<sup>46</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 146.

Berger no longer subscribes to Weber's standard epistemology but, instead, develops its Kantian ideas. If phenomenology is taken for granted, societies must be seen to construct collective ideological systems that actually explain the world to its members. For Berger, this has more to do with ideas than language. He is not primarily interested in developing his sociology in terms of poststructuralist linguistics. Berger simply assumes that our understanding of "reality" *in toto* (i.e. "knowledge") is bound and directed by the mental activity of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. This may cause problems for his theory's view of language but it is well in line with his mentalist interpretation of hermeneutics.

But why does this not lead to a conviction that order or *nomos* would describe reality properly, and why is it unable to help people and correct social behavior? A religious argument is needed. Berger then borrows the concept of theodicy from Weber. A standard view on religion states that it always needs to explain the contradiction between *nomos* and the "anomic" features and factors in reality. Weber asked, how can God be "reconciled with the imperfection of the world that he has created and rules over"? Berger follows suit. Moreover, he claims that the problem of theodicy is the fuel by which religions work. As Lott puts it when describing Berger's theory: "thus theodicies, and their sacred orders, act as *legitimations* of the way things are in and in relation to the sacred order."<sup>47</sup>

Every *nomos* is established, over and over again, against the threat of its destruction by the anomic forces endemic to the human condition. In religious terms, the sacred order of the cosmos is reaffirmed, over and over again, in the face of chaos.<sup>48</sup>

Both religious beliefs and religious behavior reflect these theodicies. For Berger, strong experiences in particular invite rites of passage. Therefore, these entail theodicies in a religion. "Rites of passage, to be sure, include happy as well as unhappy experience. It is with respect to the latter ones that they involve an implicit theodicy."<sup>49</sup> Like Weber before, Berger explains essential features of religion by an interactionist sociological theory. The ambivalence that a striving after *nomos* brings forth must be reconciled by legitimating religious beliefs through a theodicy.

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<sup>47</sup> Lott, *Vision*, 167. Also this feature connects Berger and Räsänen. Räsänen discusses the problem of theodicy in many of his Finnish writings, see Räsänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 46–47, 136; Räsänen, *Rosoinen Raamattu*, 162–163.

<sup>48</sup> Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 53.

<sup>49</sup> Berger, *Religion*, 54.

Hence the *Sacred Canopy*. For Berger, “order is the first need of all.” As Dorrien notes, the socially constructed world, for Berger, is an “ordering of experience.” A meaningful order is imposed upon people’s experiences. The purpose of a religion, thus, is to construct a sacred cosmos.<sup>50</sup> Religion, for Berger, is the heaven above us, an abstract conceptual system, a symbolic world, that provides an explanation of life—a dangerous and imperfect life. Like for Weber, also for Berger, the basic purpose of religion is to provide a theodicy: an explanation how a world so violent and unpleasant can have a perfect and good Creator.

Theology, according to this theory, is based on the conceptual system or symbolic world that constructs a sacred cosmos. “Religion offers a protective canopy of transcendent legitimacy, meaning, and order to the precarious constructions that society calls ‘reality’.”<sup>51</sup> Thus in good Weberian style Berger defines the system of meanings that is a social fact since it is the product of human beings interpreting their experiences. Theology, in this sense, is a form of culture. Or to see it in another light, culture is based on *nomos*, a sacred-like order that suggests the reality of the symbols it has abstracted. This view is in line with Berger’s main postulation: reality, for him, is a social construction.<sup>52</sup>

The essence of religion must still be explained, though. It is no wonder that Berger returns to Friedrich Schleiermacher who assumed that the only real factor on which theology can be based is religious experience.<sup>53</sup> At this phase Berger reforms his Barthian theology, since his premises had changed essentially. His theory showed that, as a historical religion, Christianity is relative and socially constructed.<sup>54</sup> In his book *A Rumour of Angels* Berger then attempts to cope with the new premises and to find a way for theology not to drift into mere existentialism as the neo-liberal tradition had. He suggests that theology must look for “signals of transcendence” in order to find signs or symbols that point beyond the natural world.<sup>55</sup> Possibilities for this are few, though. Berger ends up with a solution similar to the one Räsänen had presented earlier in his rationalist

<sup>50</sup> Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 54–55; see also Berger, *Rumour of Angels*, 71.

<sup>51</sup> Dorrien, *Study of Religion*, 32.

<sup>52</sup> This is once more a point where we can see the directing force of Berger’s epistemology. He assumes that people cannot view reality without the symbolic world that, ultimately, is a social construct. An immanent interpretation should follow, and if it does not, it is more than acceptable to ask, why?

<sup>53</sup> Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 159.

<sup>54</sup> See Dorrien, *Study of Religion*, 33.

<sup>55</sup> Berger, *Rumour of Angels*, 70–75.



historicism. These signals cannot be found in the Bible. Instead, for Berger, they are signals that must be common to all religions and investigated by the standards of the sociology of religion, not theology as such.<sup>56</sup>

Altogether, Berger's Weberian sociology develops the textualist and mentalist interpretation of religion. If for Weber religious systems provided the matrix of meaning by which social systems emerge and change, Berger focuses on the systems of meaning themselves. In his dialectical theory externalization is the continuous "outpouring" of human subjectivity into the world and objectivation is the process that produces a system of meaning that makes it a reality that confronts its original producers. For Berger, all symbolic universes and all legitimations are human products and, therefore, the sociology of knowledge is the proper tool for investigating religion. Religion itself as a human construct—any religion—is but a closed system of symbols using procaic words and providing merely human imaginings and interpretations of the divine. Therefore, it is useful to proceed by investigating how his concept of a symbolic universe relates to previous sociological explanations of the religious system.

### 3.3. *Sacred Canopy: Symbolic Universe as Superstructure*

The linguistic tradition of both sociology and the interpretation of religion maintained that religion is mainly a mental structure. Weber developed the Marxian idea according to which religion as a system of ideas legitimates certain aspects of social reality. A particular superstructure, be it law or religious dogma, justifies a certain "base," or social structure in the society. There is a power structure involved since, according to this reading, the dominant superstructure also legitimates the extant regime and authority. Religion, thus, can be interpreted as a social power structure.

Berger's own interpretation of the sociological tradition and Weberian approach intensifies such a linguistic view. The reason for this is clear: as he speaks of a sociology of knowledge, both parts must be given proper weight. As "sociology" was treated above, we must now turn to "knowledge." There is a system of ideas in Berger's theory, but this very system must necessarily be directly related to the social situation. Otherwise the link to sociology would be lost. Therefore, Berger both adopts and moulds the Marxian point of departure in his Weberian reading.

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<sup>56</sup> The relationship between the symbolic universe and the Bible will be discussed in more detail below.



The sociology of knowledge has been particularly fascinated by Marx's twin concepts of 'substructure/superstructure' (*Unterbau/Ueberbau*). [...] In any case, the fundamental 'sub/superstructure' scheme has been taken over in various forms by the sociology of knowledge, beginning with Scheler, always with an understanding that there is some sort of relationship between thought and an 'underlying' reality other than thought.<sup>57</sup>

There is one difficult problem with this presentation of sociological hermeneutics though. The analysis of Berger's phenomenological epistemology above concluded that his theory has a strong nominalist undertone. For him, concepts are not real but reality is created through externalization and objectivation. This process results in a symbolic universe that is the matrix for theology and dogma, including Christian theology. Concepts in this system have no referential meaning but, instead, the *nomos* of religion imposes a structure on this world as well as the divine world. Berger's own theory, thus, breaks the connection between thought and the underlying reality.

This inconsistency opens up one of the greatest problems in Western philosophy of science. In sociology as well as in all branches of scholarship affected by these issues (for instance linguistics, comparative literature, science of religion, and social sciences) there is a built-in tension between realism and nominalism (for instance between Comtean-Marxian realism and phenomenological nominalism). In a sense, realism was there first. For most eighteenth and nineteenth century scholars, concepts were real and scientific language reflected reality. For these scholars concepts and classes (categories) are real. With Kant's influence, however, certain approaches started to change until, finally, Husserlian phenomenology gained ground in the continental philosophy of science. For some peculiar reason, this hardly ever produced a completely phenomenological treatment of meaning and reference. Instead, even in poststructuralism, the Marxian sociological reading of meaning prevailed. Given this paradoxical point of departure, how should one then understand the nature and role of the symbolic universe in Berger's theory?

The realist part still exists in the tradition of new sociology. Even for Räsänen, the symbolic universe definitely represents some underlying reality. His application is based on Berger's theory: "A symbolic universe is a social construction. A person perceives the world in a way he is taught to perceive it by the community."<sup>58</sup> With Berger's help Räsänen is able to

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<sup>57</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 18.

<sup>58</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, 129.

treat religion on the social level. There are certain features in the theory, however, that surely came as a surprise for the latter.

Berger is a phenomenologist. In *The Social Construction of Reality* he provides an explanatory theory for the relation of propositional knowledge and the real world by following the principles of continental phenomenology. The key words in the study are “reality” and “knowledge.” The paradox described above is present in his writings from the very start.

It will be enough, for our purposes, to define “reality” as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition (we cannot “wish them away”), and to define “knowledge” as the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics.<sup>59</sup>

Like several prominent philosophers in the twentieth century, Heidegger and Derrida for instance, Berger and Luckmann use phenomenology in order to justify their epistemological ground for interpreting reality. In contradiction to traditional empirical approaches, phenomenologists focus on impressions of phenomena. Even though the first claim states that beings have a being “independent of our own volition,” the next phase leads the investigation towards the phenomenological reduction.

The method we consider best suited to clarify the foundations of knowledge in everyday life is that of phenomenological analysis, a purely descriptive method and, as such, “empirical” but not “scientific”—as we understand the nature of the empirical sciences.<sup>60</sup>

Berger and Luckmann deliberately base their analysis on a phenomenological reduction, the method that Husserl had earlier presented. An explanation focusing on phenomena must not fall into theorizing or using laws. Therefore, they refrain from any causal or genetic hypotheses, as well as from assertions about the ontological status of the phenomena analyzed. In principle, phenomenology does not want to present statements about the ontological nature of reality. In the treatment of sociology, this usually succeeds, too. “Different objects present themselves to consciousness as constituents of different spheres of reality.”<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, this theory provides a hermeneutical explanation for how concepts live in a culture. In a community, objectivations of experience are

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<sup>59</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 13.

<sup>60</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 34.

<sup>61</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 35.

institutionalized, and such a procedure needs common legitimation. "The function of legitimation is to make objectively available and subjectively plausible the 'first-order' objectivations that have been institutionalized."<sup>62</sup>

For Berger and Luckmann, there are different levels of legitimation. The fundamental legitimating explanation concerns vocabulary. The second level contains theoretical propositions. The third level contains "explicit theories by which an institutional sector is legitimated in terms of a differentiated body of knowledge." The symbolic universe—a concept that later became Räsänen's key term—constitutes the fourth level of legitimation:

These are bodies of theoretical tradition that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality, using the term 'symbolic' in the way we have previously defined.<sup>63</sup>

The symbolic universe itself is a difficult concept. It is no longer a concept that simply bows under the weight of phenomenological nominalism. Instead, it is a cultural concept that allows for stable meaning. Focusing on the idea of symbol, however, saves the concept from the most difficult pitfalls. A collection and network of symbols is merely a linguistic structure that provides a system for a discourse. Therefore, there is an essential distinction between the concept of a symbolic universe and the idea of a transcendental signified in Berger's theory.<sup>64</sup>

What is interesting is that, according to Berger, a sociological understanding of symbols puts them into a context. There is a collective feature in the system. For Berger as well as for Räsänen, symbols are not subjective. This is where the latter found a kindred spirit in the former. Ideas work in a chain. Therefore, already in the sphere of the sociology of knowledge, the idea of continuous reinterpretation belongs to the theory's dynamics. There are also other examples of this in recent scholarship. For example, Giddens pays particular attention to this feature in his own treatment of sociology.

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<sup>62</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 110.

<sup>63</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 112–113.

<sup>64</sup> As regards language, Berger adopts the Weberian view according to which scientific language is something completely different from that of the symbolic world. Even though his theory suggests that scientific discourse is just one symbolic world among others, for Berger it maintains its objective nature. As we have seen, phenomenology almost without exception implies a dualist view of language, or seeks for indicative language or metalanguage.

Human social activities [...] are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors.<sup>65</sup>

As Räsänen adopts Berger and Luckmann's phenomenological theory he moves towards Derrida and other poststructuralists who develop the fundamental principles that Husserl introduced. New German sociology as such is not poststructuralist in the strict sense of the word. But as it is a phenomenological approach, it can be seen in parallel to aspects of French structuralism. When Räsänen joins the tradition he necessarily adopts phenomenological principles because the sociology of knowledge would be incomprehensible without them. And he joins with fervor. The conclusions of his analyses in the *Beyond* proclaim that, in the end, phenomenology must surpass history: "In summary, it may be more suitable to characterize the project described as a *phenomenology* of early Christian religious thought than as its history." The present analysis may cause one to suspect the validity of that statement, but this remains to be seen in the treatment of the issue below. Simultaneously, however, this inevitably means that Räsänen inherits all the theoretical problems attached to that theory.<sup>66</sup>

The crucial distinction is that empiricism and phenomenology are opposites. According to empiricism, reality lies open before the scholar's eyes. As far as epistemology is concerned, reality writes itself onto the *tabula rasa* of the observer. The basis of knowledge, in this case, is reality.<sup>67</sup> This is also the approach on which historical criticism of the Bible was first grounded. Phenomenology in its various forms denies this. Especially in the poststructuralist version, the process of perceiving things is reversed: all we have is impressions. Knowledge is a matter of organizing subjective phenomena. The basis of knowledge, thus, is the human mind. Knowledge is dependent on language, and language in turn is a closed system of signs. It is almost surprising how precisely Berger and Luckmann adopt the phenomenological, nominalist view of language.

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<sup>65</sup> Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 2.

<sup>66</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, 118. Also Adam casts doubts on Räsänen's consistency in this matter. Adam, *Making Sense*, 98–100.

<sup>67</sup> One needs to make a distinction between epistemology and hermeneutics here. Räsänen remarks that his hermeneutics does not rely on pure empiricism because no individual mind in a community is a *tabula rasa* as such. Everyone lives and works in a tradition. This does not mean, however, that he would have changed his inductivist approach on historical study. He just wants to separate these two from each other.

I apprehend the reality of everyday life as an ordered reality. Its phenomena are prearranged in patterns that seem to be independent of my apprehension of them and that impose themselves upon the latter. The reality of everyday life appears already objectified, that is, constituted by an order of objects that have been designated *as* objects before my appearance on the scene. The language used in everyday life continuously provides me with the necessary objectifications and posits the order within which these make sense and within which everyday life has meaning for me.<sup>68</sup>

Therefore, any ideological statement or world view is assumed to be based on sociologically structured symbols and so they become part of a symbolic universe. For Berger, religion offers “a protective canopy” of transcendent legitimacy and meaning, as Dorrien noted above. A *nomos*, a meaningful order, needs to be imposed on religious life as well. A symbolic universe directing a religion is a superstructure and therefore, as we have underlined before, religion is a mental structure. For Berger, symbolic universes are “human products.”

Such a dichotomy between realism and phenomenology is destined to create problems in scholarly discussion, and especially for Räsänen’s hermeneutics. With Berger, Räsänen shares in the difficult problem of choosing between these two. And as usual, in practice, the choice is not made. Berger and Luckmann still follow Husserl’s original desire to avoid ontological statements after the phenomenological reduction. This is the crucial place where Räsänen inevitably drifts into conflict with his predecessors. In his application, the phenomenological reduction becomes identified with an immanent reduction of theology. Even though Räsänen attempts to avoid such a shortcut there is no logical alternative to it. He does say in one text that interpreting the language of faith as an expression of the community’s symbolic world does not mean that one should accept or adopt an ontological reduction as well. “Science” as he says, does not attempt to say anything about the transcendent reality behind experience or the process of interpretation.<sup>69</sup> But is he consistent in stating that? In practice he denies every possibility to say anything about that reality.

The basic problem with Räsänen’s reservation is that he has already applied the phenomenological reduction to a critique of metaphysics. This became apparent when we discussed Räsänen’s relation to Bultmann’s hermeneutics in the previous chapters. For Räsänen, theological statements

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<sup>68</sup> Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 35–36. Unlike Berger, Räsänen understands “reality” in terms of strict empiricism.

<sup>69</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 92 (1987) 387; *Beyond*, 135–136.

in the New Testament are not 'neutral' symbols whose truth-value is just a matter of theological choice. Instead, Räsänen states that dogmatic propositions are mythical expressions that have no transcendental reference whatsoever. In this respect Räsänen's theory of interpretation is well in line with Derrida's poststructuralist phenomenology. They both assume that words cannot attain transcendental truth. There is no theological epistemology that could speak of metaphysical reality. Religious language cannot escape the prison of the system of language. This example shows how difficult the basic epistemological problem is to solve.

The problem of nominalism in itself is rather difficult. It concerns essential principles of philosophy. A nominalist scholar attempts to create a theory according to which nominalist language, despite being restricted by the closed system of language (or the symbolic universe), is able to influence the substructure, or social reality. This, according to the theory, means that reality is nothing but an impression, a mental structure. Generally speaking, there is nothing exceptional in this. It is a typical, phenomenological statement. And this is what Berger stated from the very start: the social construction of reality.

True nominalists believe that all we have is an interpreted reality, an imaginative belief about the appearance of this world. There is no "real reality," they would say, because such a thing would be unattainable. This is why also all postulated "problems" a scholar sees in life or in research must be regarded merely as impressions and constructions. The result of a fully coherent nominalist view is so strict that no scholar applies these views consistently in their investigation. Berger of course attempts to, but he never proceeds to issues where the final contradiction would become evident. Räsänen faces a somewhat more difficult situation. His hermeneutical theory is based on the idea that the crises on which social change relies must be real. To be consistent in phenomenological nominalism, however, one should assume that the crises are likewise just constructions that cannot grasp reality as such.

In poststructuralism this tension and these contradictions are usually solved by assuming that the real world has no connection whatsoever with the symbolic world or human beliefs. Words are considered merely tools in the social struggle over power. The only thing that is real is the struggle and it does not really depend on ideologies. Because there are no real views, there is just a social struggle. This never leads to a completely coherent theory. Should Räsänen wish to make his thinking more consistent, he might proceed in this direction. This, however, is something he does not want to do because he remains an empiricist on the topic of

historical investigation. In addition, he does consider many values to be real when criticizing traditional Christian faith.

All in all, Berger's sociological theory concerning the symbolic universe is basically a Weberian construct built on Marxian premises. He has developed these ideas though, into a sociology of knowledge theory that attempts to explain the phenomenon of religion by putting emphasis on language.

- (1) Religion is a mental structure.
- (2) It concerns language.
- (3) Religion is based on a conceptual system (symbols).
- (4) The system itself is a social (human) construction.
- (5) The process is dialectical: the conceptual superstructure is a human construction, but it also affects and changes reality.
- (6) The symbolic world (tradition) makes religion work but religious practice also changes symbols as the tradition grows.

#### 3.4. *Core Experience: Solving the Problem of Historicism*

Core experience has turned out to be the crucial concept that mediates between social reality and the symbolic world in Berger's theory. As he said in the passage quoted by Räisänen: "At the heart of the religious phenomenon is prereflective, pretheoretical experience." In his *Heretical Imperative* Berger explicates how experience becomes the directing force within religious tradition.<sup>70</sup>

Berger's point of departure in this book is similar to that of his earlier ones. "Any human experience that is to be communicated to others and preserved over time must be expressed in symbols."<sup>71</sup> This Weberian fact provides the basis for the explanation of religious experiences. Berger then uses three important concepts that all describe what happens in the interpretative process: reflection, symbolization, and projecting. He admits that the production of religious language is a reflective process, but this reflection can be perceived "as a vast symbolization."

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<sup>70</sup> Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 34.

<sup>71</sup> Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 50.

Religion can be understood as a human projection because it is communicated in human symbols. But this very communication is motivated by an experience in which a metahuman reality is injected into human life.<sup>72</sup>

Therefore, theological tradition has its place. "An important part of any religious tradition is the development of theoretical reflection." Religious tradition grows. According to Berger, new generations must explain to themselves why they cling to a certain tradition. Therefore, "a religious tradition must develop reflective thought because of the social requirement of legitimation." But since there are later interpretations with lesser authoritative status than previous ones, there must also clearly be important starting points.<sup>73</sup>

Furthermore, this is where the idea of "original experience" becomes important. For Berger, original experience is *the* core experience above all others in a religion. In order to understand a religion one must make a distinction between the point of departure and later reflections. In the case of the New Testament, Berger states, it is quite difficult to decide between these two. The aim, however, is simple: "The classical case of this difficulty is the so-called quest for the historical Jesus, the problem of uncovering what 'really took place' in Galilee and Jerusalem during those days." The core cannot be defined because the "empirical core" has not been uncovered behind "later Christian interpretations." The task itself, however, is necessary, because "the distinction between religious experience and religious reflection is crucial."<sup>74</sup>

For Berger, the process that takes place in history is as inevitable as it is distorting. He assumes that the later interpretations never contain the true content of the original view. Tradition, for Berger, is a process and a chain. But as this is a problem to be solved, it is also an opportunity: "for it opens up the *possibility of going back, as far as possible*, to the core of the experience itself." Such a return, for Berger, means no rationalization but a true attempt to reach the original point of departure. He aims at the primordial experience, the original gospel.

Berger writes almost like an apologist here since the original experience is the place where the essence of Christian faith lies. For him, it is compulsory to search for the first experience because the relativizing forces of Western philosophy have attempted to displace the original reli-

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<sup>72</sup> Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 52.

<sup>73</sup> Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 52–53.

<sup>74</sup> Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 53.



gious phenomenon. Berger has not abandoned his Barthian background completely.

This is particularly important for anyone using the modern intellectual disciplines of history and the social sciences for his understanding of religion. These disciplines are deeply relativizing in their effect—a tradition is understood as the product of multiple historical causes, a theology as the outcome of this or that socioeconomic conflict, and so on. More than once, during the last two hundred years or so of scholarship on religion, the religious phenomenon actually seemed to disappear beneath these relativizations.<sup>75</sup>

Such polarization brings us to the nucleus of Berger's hermeneutical thinking. Beyond such relativities of history, "it is the core experience," he says, "that must constitute the final objective of any inquiry into the religious phenomenon." By core experience he means here the original experience that can at least partly be attained by "going back" and travelling against the current of the development of tradition. In other words, for Berger, the core experience in Christian faith and Christian tradition is Jesus and his original experience of the divine.

We can state that Berger in fact discusses the classical problem concerning the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Just like Weber in his time inherited the history-of-religion approach to New Testament history, Berger has inherited the *Historie-Geschichte* debate that derives from nineteenth century German historicism. Berger suggests a new solution for the age-old problem: how can one secure Christian faith, which is about to be swallowed by the rationalist world, the world that (justifiably, he says) has noted that Christian religion as such is merely a human construction?

Berger's answer reminds us of several other answers proposed for the same question over the years: all one can trust is personal experience. Only his version of the problem-solving is individual. He states that the basic difficulty can be overcome when one realizes that the core experience must be searched for—and found—in the life of the historical Jesus himself. Core experience, thus, is transferred to the psychic reality of the Jesus of history, in the mental world a real person who has lived in the past.

What about the Bible, then? Berger's interest in the original experience raises the question about the relationship between symbolic world and the New Testament. Do the Gospels, given the conditions discussed

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<sup>75</sup> Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 53; my italics.

above, represent Jesus' true experience or should they be considered mere human construction? In a theoretical sense, the Bible could probably represent a written version of a symbolic universe or, rather, it could be held to be a product of a symbolic universe that is constructed on a true experience of God. This, however, is precisely where the problem lies. According to Berger's immanent sociology, a symbolic universe is completely a human construct. Anything that is expressed in words and written down belongs to the social world. Therefore, Berger says, the Bible cannot be considered divinely inspired or revelatory. Instead, it is the record of "a specific complex of human experience." It is one system of meanings, reflecting a specific symbolic universe, expressing historically conditioned interpretations of experience.<sup>76</sup>

Berger follows Bultmann here. They both assume that it is impossible to express any true theology in human words. Should one attempt to do so, as the apostles did, it will always end in mythical language or human constructions. Berger adopts Bultmann's claim that no religion—Christianity included—can have valid doctrines or any stable views on any religious matters.<sup>77</sup>

Put differently, "literal inspiration" is impossible, if for no other reason, because the language of any religious tradition is a *human* language—the product of a human history and the carrier of a vast assemblage of human memories, most of which have nothing whatever to do with religion. On the other hand, though, the same fact precludes the opposite view that religious experience is *nothing* but a reflection of this particular history.<sup>78</sup>

In a sense, then, Berger's hermeneutics is an attempt to solve the problem of historicism. He is interested in finding a solution for the modern problem: can we save Christian faith in the new situation the Western world now finds itself in? Can pure faith be rescued from the pressure of changing world views and developing epistemology? Berger in his Barthian apology consistently rejects the standard answers of liberal culture

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<sup>76</sup> Berger, *Rumour of Angels*, 106.

<sup>77</sup> This similarity is important to note because Berger distances himself from Bultmann. He probably does not want to sound too existentialist and may even assume that Bultmann has strayed too far from the Barthian position. Nevertheless, Berger's own hermeneutical program closely resembles that of Bultmann. Cf. Berger's extensive treatment of Bultmann's hermeneutics in Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 101–121.

<sup>78</sup> Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 51–52. Berger does present some criticism of Bultmann, but it is quite muted.

demanding relativization. The defect in his interpretation, however, is the inability to justify any propositional theology at all.<sup>79</sup>

Hence the “heretical imperative.” Berger is convinced that theology, as it appears in new situations and new contexts, must inevitably leave behind, as invalid, the symbolic worlds or concepts of its present symbolic world. In this respect his theory remains completely dualistic.

*In premodern situations there is a world of religious certainty, occasionally ruptured by heretical deviations. By contrast, the modern situation is a world of religious uncertainty, occasionally staved off by more or less precarious constructions of religious affirmation. Indeed, one could put this change even more sharply: For premodern man, heresy is a possibility—usually a rather remote one; for modern man, heresy typically becomes a necessity. Or again, modernity creates a new situation in which picking and choosing becomes an imperative.*<sup>80</sup>

Also according to Berger, doctrinal theology belongs to a premodern world. The Weberian metanarrative concerning the development of Western history also affects his thinking. Even though he detests the turn to relativization, he simultaneously postulates the necessity of secularization. For some reason, Berger does not think that his dualistic sociological interpretation of religion and theology as a human construction would completely represent secularization as such. Be that as it may, this imperative is in accord with Berger’s sociological hermeneutics. “Now, suddenly, heresy no longer stands out against a clear background of authoritative tradition.”<sup>81</sup> There is no doctrinal tradition that should or even could direct Christian belief. Instead, the state of affairs Berger has described is a “point of departure for constructive religious reflection.”<sup>82</sup>

The vocabulary is familiar from Räsänen’s writings. It is easy to see that in many respects Berger’s ideas agree completely with Räsänen’s hermeneutics. Räsänen too holds that Christian expressions of faith are only human constructions. A revelatory religion is impossible. All we have are

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<sup>79</sup> There is discussion about Berger’s “turn” from his Barthian conviction to a more immanent sociological interpretation, the “turn to the experiencing religious subject,” as Dorrien expresses it but it must be noted that Berger maintains his dualistic view. He still contests relativizations in his later books. Dorrien, *Study of Religion*, 33. Lott even speaks of his “methodological atheism.” Lott, *Vision*, 169. This is true concerning the claim that the symbolic world is a closed system and human construction, but it does not change Berger’s original dualism.

<sup>80</sup> Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 28; italics his.

<sup>81</sup> Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 28.

<sup>82</sup> Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 31.

expressions of how people interpret their religious experiences. The relationship between these two scholars is not that simple, though. As their hermeneutical programs are investigated in detail, significant differences will become clear.

Berger's "turn from authority to experience" sounds like the statement Räsänen made already in his *Authority*. It is true that experience, once more, is placed at the core of the hermeneutical system. It is apparent that this is one of the most important reasons for Räsänen to join forces with Berger. On the face of it this may seem unproblematic since both scholars focus heavily on experience. Their different conceptions of the nature of experience, however, will make the issue more complex. Räsänen of course holds that Berger is one of the first scholars to give experience its proper role in the theory of understanding culture and religion. In this respect the point of departure as such is clear.

Yet theoretical assertions are no more than reflection caused by fundamental experiences. "At the heart of the religious phenomenon is prereflective, pretheoretical experience" [...]. Berger sees it as imperative that the "final objective of any inquiry into the religious phenomenon" be the *core experience* in its various forms.<sup>83</sup>

Core experience as a religious fact can now be explained by a sociological method. Since it is only a subjective phenomenon, Räsänen is able to treat it in terms of scientific explanation. Thus, Berger's theory answers his previous question about the immanent nature of scientific theology. Not all the problems concerning the definition of experience were solved, though. In the new context there are at least three different ways to define it. Berger first states that a religious phenomenon as such is a *prereflective* experience. Already here we find a contradiction with Räsänen. Berger is closer to Bultmann who, according to chapter 3 above, defines religious *Erlebnis* as a non-verbal inner experience of the divine. Räsänen denied such a possibility and defined religious experience in terms of experiencing different social events.<sup>84</sup>

As we noted already in 2.4, Räsänen often defines the concept of experience differently from Berger. In his discussions with his Finnish colleague Uro, Räsänen has elaborated on the concept itself. Uro posed him

<sup>83</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, 124–125. From Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 34.

<sup>84</sup> Such a difference proves that, for Räsänen, experience is something that is already reflected upon. The difference can be explained by Berger's and Räsänen's contrasting relationships to Otto's conception of the numinous, as we shall argue below. See also 2.4.

a question concerning the profane nature of the concept: "What in that case will be left of 'experience' as an independent category distinguished from interpretation?" The roles of experience and interpretation seem to be confused in Räsänen's thinking. Räsänen's answer in fact confirms Uro's suggestions and questions.

My countering question will be: *what* is it in the first place that produces the new interpretations of tradition? There must be something between tradition and interpretation; do we have anything better with which to replace "experience?" A new situation, a new context? Probably—the issue itself will not be changed by that.<sup>85</sup>

For Räsänen, thus, experience is a social matter. He continues his discussion with Uro: "I really do mean, as Uro too understands my text, that 'experience' as a term must be understood in a very general sense; it comprises also 'everyday experience' and completely 'profane' experiences." Räsänen does not speak about personal religious, ecstatic experience. This is the main reason why he does not accept Otto's concept of the numinous, as we saw, and it likewise explains his distancing himself from Berger's theory. For Räsänen, hermeneutics cannot be based on metaphysical epistemology.

Räsänen remains a Weberian sociologist when he says that all human experiences must be considered equal. "We must rather consider it probable that experiences that are classified as 'religious', in a psychological sense, are similar to certain experiences that are not religious."<sup>86</sup> Since experience, for Räsänen, is a psychological issue, he treats it as a mental act. Berger never reduced the alleged "original experience" into a mere mental act. Räsänen thus assumes that both experience *and* interpretation are social events. One essential question that arises is: what produces the religious symbol in the first place? We will return to this problem later.

There is another problem that cannot be overlooked. The secular immanence of Räsänen's theory leads to a completely social explanation. As there is no true experience and no true meeting with God, all expressions of religious experience are relative. Early Church history, as Räsänen states, cannot be a matter of discussing orthodox faith, and its investigation cannot be a study of doctrines. Instead, all research must focus on social matters: power struggles in the congregations. This, of course, is what Räsänen himself has been doing when writing his history

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<sup>85</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 102 (1997) 122.

<sup>86</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 92 (1987) 382.

of religion. The logic of his argument is simple. As social events surpass inner experience, the only thing that can explain change is a social contradiction, a crisis. This is why Räsänen focuses on group dynamics. Who will be accepted, and who will be shut out? Who is getting in, and who is left outside? Theological views in such sociological ruminations are but trivial matters.

The essential difference for defining Christian core experience, then, becomes evident when we compare Berger's main idea with Räsänen's hermeneutics. Berger is ready to "go back" to the historical Jesus in order to legitimate Christian tradition. Räsänen, however, burns his bridges. According to his theory the core experience that changes Christian tradition is usually a social event in the life of the community. We need to remember that, when speaking of experiences, Räsänen refers to social crises. This is the main reason why Räsänen, in his *Beyond*, distances himself from Berger's position.

I find Berger's distinction between experience and its theoretical interpretation crucial. But I wish to understand "experience" in a much broader sense. Unlike Berger and Eliade, I wish to outline a conception in which precisely the "profane" everyday reality, bound in time and history, is taken with utmost seriousness. It is this reality that has evoked most of those experiences which appear in the Bible.<sup>87</sup>

The basic difference between these two scholars gradually becomes clear. Räsänen can be said to develop a more Weberian, immanent explanation than Berger, despite the latter's "methodological atheism" that was discussed above. A short comparison of their crucial distinctions confirms the difference. Both of these scholars present a triadic pattern of interpretation. The basic dynamic of the patterns, however, is not identical.<sup>88</sup>

experience-tradition-reflection (Berger)  
tradition-experience-interpretation (Räsänen)

The difference is clear, and it is based on the differing views we have investigated above. Berger believes that experience gives birth to tradition. Räsänen, however, assumes that tradition comes first and social experience just directs its interpretation. Räsänen does still speak of experience but, as we have seen earlier, he has little use for inner experience itself. He does not follow Bultmann who focused on *Erlebnis*. He seldom provides practical

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<sup>87</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, 125.

<sup>88</sup> Berger, *Heretical Imperative*, 32; Räsänen, *Beyond*, 122.

examples of what an experience could mean in the life of a human being. In his theory, experience is more just an auxiliary means that enables him to argue that new interpretations are being made on the ground of certain (historical) events at a particular moment in the community's life.

Räisänen is bound by the historical-critical method and where, for him, tradition and redaction have a primary role in hermeneutics. Therefore, he does not approach the issue in the same way as Berger. For Räisänen, hermeneutics is not a matter of reinterpreting experience or a verbal description of the meaning of a religious experience. And he never suggests that one should attempt to search for the original experience. Instead, hermeneutics is a matter of reinterpreting tradition in the light of new experiences. In this respect, experience, for Räisänen, is not a religious experience at all, not in the traditional sense of the word. If, for Berger, the development of theological tradition is a human construct which the sociology of religion can investigate and explain, for Räisänen the experience itself is only a human experience that belongs in the sphere of humanity's 'profane' everyday reality, as he says.

This difference is significant for their respective hermeneutical theories. In fact the comparison between Berger and Räisänen helps us define the latter's sociological hermeneutics better. Berger still attempts to find the point of contact where transcendental reality intersects this world. His solution is Barthian: there is but one vertical point and that is the "original experience" or "core experience." Räisänen no longer assumes that a point of contact can be found. He hints that there are two different worlds—and that the transcendental world as such can even be questioned. The comparison with Berger shows thus that, in theory, Räisänen actually agrees with the death-of-God movement. According to him the best an interpreter can say is that God can be experienced only in his absence. This means the erasure of the God-sign. As Cupitt put it, all that Christians today are dealing with is a river of signs. Räisänen goes along with Winquist who refused to discuss anything but the "epiphanies of darkness." For Räisänen, core experience does not solve the problem of historicism—since for him, such a problem does not even exist.

Summarizing the above-mentioned issues we can note that there are both certain differences and some essential similarities between Berger and Räisänen. They do understand experience differently, and Räisänen rejects the idea of an original experience. Furthermore, the latter's theory of interpretation is much more immanent in principle, even though the practical implications may appear quite similar to Berger's. What unites



these two scholars is the “*turn from authority to experience*” as Berger puts it. There is a difference between history and explanation, social history and theological interpretation. They both believe that theology is only a human construction. As Weber had already suggested, religion is mainly a mental structure. The symbolic world, according to this view, is a closed system and doctrinal systems are only reflection on tradition. And finally, both Berger and Räsänen assume that the development of the theological or Christian tradition (in this case) is distorting. The chain of interpretation invites new interpretations that are grounded on changed premises. The “heretical imperative” produces views that are no longer in agreement with previous views extant in a particular religion’s history and probably cannot even be reconciled with them.

### 3.5. *On the Paradoxicality of Sociological Structuralism*

Another theoretical problem Berger and Räsänen have inherited from their predecessors in sociology is the paradox of sociological structuralism that was mentioned above. Like many other sociologists, Berger and Luckmann follow two different principles that exclude each other. As noted they, on the one hand, assume that language reflects social structures. This is the only practical premise that can justify their conclusions. On the other hand, however, they assume that words as signs of the symbolic universe are mere labels for phenomena experienced in the community. The source of this paradox is evident: the phenomenological reduction repudiates the idea of direct contact between language and reality. Objects no doubt “present themselves to consciousness” but their naming is a nominalistic process of labeling social symbols.

The existence of this paradox has widely been recognized in the criticism of the poststructuralist tradition. The first premise as such is quite openly present in Berger and Luckmann’s work. They state that, in sociology, all reasoning is based on the idea that language reflects social reality. It is interesting that the point of departure has been taken from the Marxist tradition. In terms of the philosophy of science it belongs to materialism, and in terms of linguistic theory, it belongs to a pre-Saussurean age. These two theoretical positions are not easily reconciled with phenomenology. This kind of background explains, however, why this tradition simply postulates a direct relationship between reality and language.

According to the interpretative pattern, social reality, the *substructure*, directs thought and knowledge, the *superstructure*. In this sense



the “social structure” is an empirical fact that affects interpretation and ideology. In structuralist sociology scholars hold that social phenomena are real. This is stated also in general articles in dictionaries: “there are a set of social structures that are unobservable but which generate observable social phenomena.”<sup>89</sup> Since the days of Lévi-Strauss the traditional Marxian view has been given a linguistic justification, as these entries in dictionaries also note. Outside linguistic signs there must be some kind of subject that provides meanings for those signs.<sup>90</sup>

The existence of such a dichotomy here reveals that there is a contradiction both in the core of structuralist sociology and French poststructuralism. Power structures and dominating discourses are questioned and rejected because their legitimation of status quo power does not hold. The play with metanarratives has been just a language game which has supported the structures of society. Here language dominates, so criticism is justified by the claim that language cannot reflect reality. Simultaneously, however, the rejection of previous discourses is legitimated through the sociological idea that language does reflect reality. Structures of knowledge are dependent on social reality. Substructure directs superstructure. As Berger and Luckmann stated: there must be some sort of relationship between thought and an “underlying” reality.

The problem is evident: dominating discourses can be dissolved only by stating that language cannot have any direct relationship to social reality. Zygmunt Bauman has described this kind of tension as the “ethical paradox” of postmodern thought. Ethics, despite being a random example, fits in the discussion because the superstructure is usually considered normative. This is indeed how Berger understands it. In ethics, poststructuralists aim at reversing conventional hierarchies. Parallels are easy to find. Räsänen, too, in his chain of interpretation, usually speaks of a complete reinterpretation of previous theological views and Christian doctrines. Such a revision needs to rely on high profile values. And this, according to Bauman, reveals the inconsistency.

The ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*. s.v. structuralism.

<sup>90</sup> See for instance *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. s.v. structuralism.

<sup>91</sup> Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, xxii.

As poststructuralists search for ethical authority, Bauman notes, they are constantly reminded of the essential relativity of all moral codes. This applies to all values, social or theological. How to defend the oppressed in a situation where “oppression” is just a given value in a system? Even moral codes, for a true poststructuralist theory, are matters of discourse, constructions inside a linguistic system where words refer only to words. All their values are invented. They are illusions that have no referential meaning or universal significance. In practice, of course, writers usually do not address this kind of problem, but this does not remove the problem itself. Therefore, analysts speak of a true contradiction.<sup>92</sup>

Berger’s dualist view on referential meaning and his ambivalence towards the realist and nominalist views on language further explains his dualist view on religion as such. On the one hand, Berger, in a good Weberian style, provides an immanent interpretation of religion—any religion, Christianity included. On the other hand, he attempts to maintain the numinous behind the system at any costs. The system itself becomes a sign for the apophatic reality of Divinity.

First of all, the symbolic world, for Berger, is a human construct. Its genesis belongs to the dialectical movement of human culture. It is a result of externalization that allegedly occurs in social groups everywhere and at all times. Religion, in this respect, can be completely explained as a quest for theodicy: people attempting to create a *nomos* for the imperfection of the world. In this respect Christianity is one religion among others. The Bible has no relevance as a source of God’s revelation. The nature of true religion must be inferred by reason alone.<sup>93</sup>

On the other hand, however, Berger remains ambivalent towards the numinous. Even in his books *A Rumour of Angels* and *The Heretical Imperative* he still attempts to find a justification for metaphysics. The task is almost impossible because, in his theory, he has already provided an immanent explanation of religion as such. The attempt itself betrays a Kantian ideal. For Berger, *nomos* corresponds with Kant’s concept of ethics. Morality, according to Kant, has a divine legitimation. Berger appears

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<sup>92</sup> Even though the basic problems of sociological structuralism need to be discussed, the detailed issues concerning poststructuralism will be treated in chapter 4 below.

<sup>93</sup> In his *A Rumour of Angels* Berger says that as the New Testament is merely a record of human experience, “it has no special position as against any comparable record,” be that Buddhist or any other kind of record. Berger, *Rumour of Angels*, 106.

to assume that *nomos*, too, has a divine legitimation—even though it is not verbally or existentially valid in any absolute sense.<sup>94</sup>

In this respect, Berger's sociology of religion, based on his sociology of knowledge, is a Kantian theory. *Nomos*, even though a completely human construct, does have a deeper justification. It is a construction of pure reason and, therefore, it must have a legitimation that is above the normal social realities of human life. Human beings recognize *nomos* as a valid category and so battle against the anomic features of reality. Berger's categorical imperative differs little from Kant's.<sup>95</sup>

For Berger, the imperfections of life are real. He does not consider the descriptions of painful reality merely fictitious human constructions. Berger assumes that a religion might speak of the anomic features of human life. In this respect he does not believe in a total "deconstructionist" social construction of reality. The sociology of knowledge does concern human epistemology but *nomos* is the proper way to treat reality. Therefore, there must be some correspondence between values and a good life. Otherwise all we have would be relativistic noise.<sup>96</sup>

It is somewhat incongruous that Berger with his phenomenological affinities holds anomic features real but Räsänen, with his rationalist positivism, tends to consider biblical descriptions of life unreal. He chooses the Nietzschean alternative according to which the biblical verdict of imperfections has no correspondence with reality. Räsänen does often speak about morality but he makes a distinction between biblical views and rational modern ethics. Altogether, Berger the phenomenologist ends up with realist conclusions but Räsänen the positivist ends up with nominalist views.

Berger, unavoidably if gradually, moves towards existentialism and starts to rely on Bultmann and Tillich, the theologians he first opposed as a young scholar. The structure of his hermeneutics is similar to that of

<sup>94</sup> See Berger, *Rumour of Angels*, 13–15, 69–70; *Heretical Imperative*, 36–43.

<sup>95</sup> In this respect Berger's theory is analogous to that of Weber which, according to Milbank, is grounded completely on Kantian views. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 83–86.

<sup>96</sup> There is an interesting debate between Berger and Räsänen's early mentor Langdon Gilkey documented in Berger's article on secular theology in *ThSt* 38 (1977) 45–55. As Dorrien notes, Berger accuses Gilkey and some other scholars for "selling out Christianity." Proponents of secular theology renounce supernatural theism and, Gilkey in particular, represents a "cognitive surrender" to secular reason. Berger's final conclusion is harsh: anti-religious dogmatism has become "a respectable form of fundamentalism." See also Dorrien, *Study of Religion*, 36. The dualistic nature of Berger's hermeneutics is apparent even though the emphasis may have moved towards immanent sociology over the years.

Bultmann. Firstly, the New Testament provides no proper point of departure for the interpretation of true Christian faith. Secondly, the theological system of dogma, which forms the core of Christian confession, must be understood as nothing but a human construction. If one wishes to keep to a metaphysical definition of religion, it must be based either on a *kerygma* that has no words, or a divine reality or force behind the symbolic world found in historical records. This is why Berger states: “the procedure I am suggesting partakes of the ‘living, moving restless power’ of what Paul Tillich called ‘the Protestant principle’, ‘Protestantism has a principle that stands beyond all its realizations’.”<sup>97</sup>

There are also other problems between Berger and Räisänen. Even though Räisänen makes full use of Berger’s phenomenological tradition in his interpretation theory, he never applies the same approach to historical study. If one is to make a phenomenological reduction in reading any text and in treating any historical event, all one has is symbols. If one takes these premises at face value, there should no longer be any room for historicism. It is no longer possible to make a distinction between what Jesus said or did not say. It is impossible to apply the criterion of dissimilarity to biblical texts when the criterion itself has become a symbol. Even the experiences of the scholar should be subjected to the reduction. All he has is impressions. He deals with phenomena, and his convictions are subjective experiences that cannot justify twentieth century German historical criticism.

Can such a contradiction be resolved? It can be explained but not annulled. It is apparent that, in Räisänen’s theory, history and theology have been separated from each other. He has adopted a dualistic epistemology similar to Berger’s. Räisänen treats explanation differently from interpretation. As a scholar he reserves the right to present scientific judgments about the historical nature of New Testament texts. Religion, however, must be treated in terms of phenomenology. This proves that Räisänen believes in true scientific language. He also applies it in his historical study. Only the area of religious language is treated differently. The interesting question is, why does he make such a distinction? Berger’s example provides one answer: Räisänen goes beyond Kantian hermeneutics.

This confirms the hypothesis that the main purpose behind Räisänen’s hermeneutics, unlike that of Berger, is the rejection of metaphysics.

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<sup>97</sup> Berger, *Rumour of Angels*, 106–107; cf. *Heretical Imperative*, 139.

Räisänen defines the sphere of religious language as statements about metaphysics. Religious concepts belong to the symbolic universe but, in early Christian thought, they are intended to be symbols of the transcendent. Thus the field of language is divided. This division does not resemble the one made by Heidegger or Derrida, though. For Räisänen it is not a matter of “inauthentic” language incapable of expressing Being.

There are several details that prove this. First of all, Räisänen states that religious discourse is a matter of interpreting one’s experience of ordinary life. This is something he emphasizes even against Berger. The religious symbolic world, for Räisänen, is dependent on immanent experience. Then he proceeds to metaphysical statements. For Räisänen, only descriptions of the transcendent—the domain of Christian doctrines—are inexpressive, contextual statements. This is in line with what he has spoken about myths. Räisänen turns Heidegger’s hierarchy around. For Räisänen, inauthentic language is the language of myths and the dogmatic language of the kerygma. And even more: the descriptive language of immanent perception is the true authentic language, which serves well as a basis for the construction of the symbolic universe.<sup>98</sup>

As we have seen, Räisänen’s rejection of metaphysics, thus, turns into demythologization and dekerygmization. His hermeneutics depends on the historicist approach of his early years. This is one point where Räisänen departs from Berger’s sociology of knowledge. He exploits the sociology of knowledge only in order to replace the Bible’s mythical theology by the religious interpretation of human experience.

The most difficult problem that arises from Räisänen’s selective reading of Berger concerns the distinction between subjectivism and collectivism. As noted above, Berger proposes a collective interpretation of tradition: “A symbolic universe is a social construction. A person perceives the world in a way he is taught to perceive it by the community.” Räisänen, however, appears to need a sociology of knowledge in order to explain what happens in an individual’s mind. Since his theory focuses on crises, he compares Muhammad to Paul in their invention of new interpretations when facing difficult social situations.

Does this interpretation still maintain the principles of a sociology of knowledge? Not really. When Räisänen suggests “secondary rationalization,”

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<sup>98</sup> As we have seen above, this kind of reversal is typical of Bultmann, too. He does not follow Heidegger in abandoning inauthentic (Cartesian) language but, instead, treats it like perfect scientific language that can control reality.

especially when explaining Paul's theology (see 5.6. below), there is little difference between a personal opinion and collective symbol. What Berger called prereflective, pretheoretical experience, Räisänen treats as personal experience and personal crisis.

Berger and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge has thus, as a general theory, been important for Räisänen. Even though the sociological approach as such has not been very popular in recent New Testament interpretation, and Berger probably is not very well known among biblical scholars, the theory has become especially significant as we attempt to understand the nature of Räisänen's hermeneutics.<sup>99</sup> Räisänen's exploitation of the sociological theory is not unproblematic, though. The detailed analysis shows that he has not adopted Berger's sociology of knowledge as it stands. Instead, he has developed it in a subjectivist direction. He makes it a deductive theory: it describes how people have reinterpreted their tradition when facing personal crises or difficulties in their community. For Berger, the collective tradition was essential when explaining the symbolic universe. Räisänen, however, appears to think that an individual changes collective tradition and constructs his or her own symbolic universe when needed. Berger supports sociological structuralism according to which tradition simply postulates a direct relationship between reality and language. Social reality, the *substructure*, directs thought and knowledge, the *superstructure*. For him, the "social structure" is an empirical fact that affects interpretation and ideology. Simultaneously, however, symbolic universe is treated as a closed discourse. Räisänen has taken this interpretation farther. He no longer thinks that different "universes" (discourses) can refer to reality or communicate with each other. The basic pattern remains, though, and it can be seen as one of Räisänen's most important premises. Language and the symbolic universe represent, for him, reality. The substructure, for Räisänen, reveals the existence of difficult crises that give birth to new interpretations and new symbols. Räisänen also believes thus that social reality directs thought and language. Sociological structuralism is able to explain the development of early theology. The significance of the superstructure diminishes as theological symbols are understood to be mere signs for social phenomena. This is a mature and developed version of Räisänen's "chain of interpretation" in a nutshell.

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<sup>99</sup> This is not to belittle the sociological methods that some scholars have used when exploring the social environment of the New Testament. I only mean that in the recent New Testament theologies, apart from the one written by Räisänen, Berger's theory has no particular role.

### 3.6. *A Case Study: A Psychosocial Reading of Paul*

Sociological theory is one kind of reduction but, it is usually insufficient as an explanation for the production of religious ideas. As we saw already in the first chapter, Räsänen's concept of "social experience" has been crucial for his understanding of the hermeneutical process. His focus is on creative thinkers. This is not the place to speculate whether there might be a Hegelian interest in the talented religious geniuses that developed the theological thinking behind this view but, suffice it to say that for Räsänen, making theology is a matter of personal ability.

This is why Räsänen tends to emphasize psychological features in his explanations of theological construction. As we further pointed out in chapter 2, sociological hermeneutics must inevitably lead to some kind of psychologization of religious experience. As Räsänen focuses on crises and changes, he detects catalysts that produce new expressions of faith. It is only logical that, in this kind of situation, the scholar is interested in the psycho-dynamic situation of particular authors. This is how Räsänen approaches the theology of the apostle Paul.<sup>100</sup>

Gilkey already suggested that biblical stories appear as "interpretations by Hebrew faith." They must be based on the experiences the Jews had in ever-shifting situations. As the Jews interpreted their own past they expressed their views in theological concepts. Gilkey still wished to find some analogical meaning to these concepts because, without them, theology would vanish "into subjective Hebrew religious experience and interpretation."<sup>101</sup> Räsänen surpassed Gilkey's ideas and stated that hermeneutical theory must be built on these premises.

What natural theology as a concept means for Räsänen is a process where people interpret their experiences in the context in which they live. He is convinced that all different kinds of experiences are psychologically similar. Since he makes a psychologization of experience, it becomes a mental function in human life. As we have noted in the analysis, experience, for Räsänen, is not dependent on a relation. It does not reflect anything in transcendental reality. It is just a mental act that can produce different kinds of interpretation. Räsänen speaks of life situations and the human ability to attribute significance to them.

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<sup>100</sup> For Räsänen, psychological factors are part of sociological analysis, see chapter 2.5.

<sup>101</sup> Gilkey, *JR* 41 (1961) 203.



This is how we end up with the psychosocial feature in Räisänen's hermeneutics. He claims that the process he describes is simply a process concerning everyday experience. In other words he makes a psychological reduction of religion. For Räisänen there must be a scientific explanation for the emergence of all new interpretations. Therefore, it is not surprising that later, in his interpretation of Paul's theology, he presents a straightforward psychological reduction of Paul's religious experience. He states that Paul had ecstatic visions and as a fervent Jew he tended to interpret them in a religious way—thus creating his individual views about soteriology.

In many of his writings Räisänen attempts to explain Paul's theology by claiming that his personal struggles with Israel and the Mosaic law produce contradictory statements that have a merely practical purpose. For Räisänen, this is the way to find a general pattern within several different writings. In his sociology of religion the Weberian approach remains effective even in Pauline studies. No matter what the religious text, it represents the pattern of personal reflection on social experience.<sup>102</sup>

Already in his *Authority* Räisänen suggests that Paul writes his theology for psychological reasons. Theological statements and claims, often contradicting other convictions, are to be seen as just "one interpretation among the others."<sup>103</sup> What is significant, for Räisänen, after this point of departure, is the reason and motive for inventing particular explanations for theological purposes. Räisänen's treatment of Paul's theology in *Paul and the Law* follows the same lines that can be found in his early writings on the Quran. Räisänen focuses on contradictions that he assumes he is able to point out in Paul's letters. He makes these inconsistencies the core of his explanation and proceeds to deconstruct Paul's mental world. Covenantal nomism provides an important example with which Räisänen wishes to prove that even Paul's basic soteriology is only a practical effort to solve certain problems his own mission has brought up.

Räisänen provides one essential argument that is expected to explain most of Paul's theological inventions. Räisänen follows Sanders in stating that the so-called plight—solution problem is the key to resolving the

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<sup>102</sup> Räisänen's interpretation of the apostle Paul's theology can be explained mostly through his relation to the Canadian scholar E.P. Sanders and his influential theory on covenantal nomism. But this is not the most important point of departure for Räisänen's hermeneutics. As we saw above, Räisänen has already in his *Idea of Divine Hardening* suggested that Paul represents rationalized theology. Paul writes as a practical preacher and does not worry much for the theological consistency of his teaching.

<sup>103</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 81.



difficulties of the emergence of Pauline teaching. Christian soteriology, in their estimation, is a late construct that works by deduction: when one knows the result—as Paul, according to his letters, did—one can produce a chain of deductive logical reasoning and reconstruct the problem to which the later theology offers its answer.<sup>104</sup>

Sanders has defined the “plight and solution” dilemma already in his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. He states that, for Paul, “the conviction of a universal solution preceded the conviction of a universal plight.”<sup>105</sup> Paul, who naturally must have had a very positive view of the Torah before his conversion, had to think everything anew after becoming a Christian. Even his view of the law had to be renewed in light of the new situation. This is where Paul, according to Sanders, draws conclusions “backwards.” This principle Räisänen then takes as his point of departure in *Paul and the Law*, claiming that it can be detected in his other writings as well.

Because Christ is the only basis for salvation—this is Paul’s point of departure on the grounds of his Christ-experience—there can be no other grounds for it. As Christ is the only way to salvation, law cannot be one. In this case the law must have another kind of purpose in God’s plan. Paul’s inference moves backwards—to use Sanders’ expression—from solution to plight.<sup>106</sup>

Sanders and Räisänen claim that there was no “plight” properly speaking in the Jewish theology of the Second Temple period. This view needs another premise before it is coherent—namely that of covenantal nomism. Sanders’ famous theory has directed Pauline studies for three decades and need not be treated in detail here.<sup>107</sup> Suffice it to say that, according to his theory, nomism as such was not seen as plight in Judaism. No one worried that people disobeyed God’s law through petty legalism. In Paul’s original situation, thus, there was no plight at all. Therefore, the personal experience of the “solution,” the Christ event, became crucial for

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<sup>104</sup> Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 179–182; 184. I have written extensively both about Sanders’ theory and Räisänen’s conception of the law and, therefore, I shall not repeat those discussions here. See Eskola, *Theodicy and Predestination*, 18–22, 52–60, 190–208.

<sup>105</sup> Sanders, *Paul*, 474.

<sup>106</sup> Räisänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 73–74.

<sup>107</sup> In his monograph *Paul and the Law* Räisänen accepts Sanders’ view concerning covenantal nomism as a basic definition of Second Temple Jewish soteriology. Räisänen does not strictly follow Sanders, though. He believes that Paul was not simply exploiting Jewish covenantal nomism in his new theology, but attacked Jewish theology, instead. For personal reasons Paul gave his readers a biased picture of Jewish nomism. He turned covenantal theology into legalism. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 187; for the discussion, see Westerholm, *Perspectives*, 132, 174–176.

the development of novel views both on nomism and salvation. This is the logical chain according to which Räisänen claims that Paul invented his views by creating backward inferences.<sup>108</sup>

According to Räisänen Paul could not really decide whether the law was still valid or whether it had been abolished. The possibility of keeping the law seemed to be ambiguous, too. Paul's attitude towards the law was both positive and negative. Only in certain passages does Paul state that it is impossible to keep the law—namely when he is trying to prove that the Jews too are under the power of sin. On other occasions he does not think that it is impossible to fulfill the precepts of the law, even for the Gentiles.<sup>109</sup>

What is of importance in Räisänen's explanations is that these examples are not merely individual problems concerning Paul's theology of the law. Paul's main coherent idea behind all his reasoning was the Christological motif which governed his theology. Because of this Christological "bias," Paul, according to Räisänen, often gave a distorted picture of Judaism and presented conflicting statements about theology.

This leads us to the question concerning the Christological principle. Räisänen maintains that this principle has negative consequences in theology. When soteriology is governed by this premise, the definition of nomism, too, must conform to it. This again is not possible unless one does violence to Jewish tradition. Therefore, says Räisänen, the result is necessarily contradictory.

The starting point of Paul's thinking about the Torah is the Christ event, not the law. This structure of thought he fully shares with other early Christian writers. No other writer, however, is led to such radical and negative conclusions with respect to the law as Paul: the law incites man to sin and increases transgressions; the law ought to be fulfilled 100 per cent; Jews do not fulfil the law whereas the Christians do; the law was given through angels, not by God. All these negative statements are made problematic because other

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<sup>108</sup> In his analysis of Räisänen's Pauline interpretation, van Spanje suggests that Räisänen's main argument in accusing Paul of being inconsistent concerns logic. According to van Spanje, "inconsistent" in Räisänen's work "means non-logical." Therefore, any response to Räisänen's position must take that point of departure into account. Van Spanje's own position is that true interpretation of Paul's writings cannot use merely strict Western logic. A consistent hermeneutical approach must also pay attention to the context of the writing event. Van Spanje, *Inconsistency in Paul*, 156–157, 162f.

<sup>109</sup> Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 101–103. This is in fact one of the main arguments in his work. For a later discussion see the added new introduction in the revised Second edition of his book, Räisänen, *Paul and the Law 2nd Edition*, xi–xxx; "Preface to second edition."

*Pauline statements contradict them. Paul's most radical conclusions about the law are thus strangely ambiguous.*<sup>110</sup>

Such an interpretation has two important consequences. Firstly, Paul is separated from Jewish theology and his teaching is investigated as a product of psychological motives. When Räisänen says that Paul's concept of nomism is inconsistent with Jewish theology, he implies that Paul's teachings concerning the function of the law and the belief in divine judgment must also differ from those of common Judaism. According to Räisänen's theory, real historical Jewish theology has been completely different from the picture that Paul presents.<sup>111</sup>

Secondly, Räisänen's theory has some difficult theological implications. Since Paul's soteriology is reduced to a nomistic scholasticism where aspects of divine judgment, like the day of wrath and eternal punishment, have no place or significance, the result is non-eschatological theology. This leads to the neglect sin and judgment in Paul's theology. The description of Paul's soteriology remains one-sided. It is only in this perspective that the Christological factor has no other reason or purpose than to express Paul's personal, spiritual experience.<sup>112</sup>

This kind of hermeneutic in Pauline studies results in a psychosocial or "historical-psychological" interpretation of Paul. When at the end of *Paul and the Law* Räisänen writes the chapter entitled "The origins of Paul's conception of the law," he refers to Paul's psychological prehistory and then treats the whole of Paul's theology from a psychological perspective. "Conversions do have a psychological prehistory, even if the convert himself is the last one to see it." Räisänen has set out to trace Paul's mental history in this respect, and he is convinced that Pauline writings reveal it easily. "That Paul went through 'a volcanic internal crisis' can hardly be denied."<sup>113</sup> Paul is now in a situation similar to Mohammad's, according to Räisänen's Quran-studies. In Räisänen's theory interpretation focuses on the subjective experience of the writer. Thus a psychological analysis is considered a proper way to explain Paul's writings.

<sup>110</sup> Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 201.

<sup>111</sup> Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 181. After such statements, there has been a unending discussion over the nature of Second Temple Judaism, see e.g. Laato, *Paulus*, 210; Cooper, *WTJ* 44 (1982) 124, 137; Westerholm, *Perspectives*, 201–225; see also the discussion in my previous work, Eskola, *Theodicy and Predestination*, 52–60.

<sup>112</sup> Räisänen states that Paul's view of sin and the corruption of the human race is extreme. Concerning Romans 2 he says, for instance: "Paul's argument is here simply a piece of propagandist denigration." Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 101.

<sup>113</sup> Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 231.

We have of course very little hope of being able to penetrate into the psychic life of a person of the ancient world 2000 years later. Nevertheless, some psychological commonplaces are probably applicable. It is one such commonplace that the unconscious can break through in opposition to the conscious belief to which one clings.<sup>114</sup>

As noted, the basic argument is similar to that given in Räisänen's investigations into the Quran. At times of crisis and inner conflict, people are destined to create new interpretations of their tradition. This is what Paul does, according to Räisänen, as he attempts to balance his Messianic hopes with his sudden ecstatic experiences in the apocalyptic group he has joined—once again through a long process that can be depicted as a difficult personal crisis.<sup>115</sup>

Hence the emphasis on charismatic enthusiasm. Räisänen necessarily needs to find a factor that can justify the idea of secondary rationalization. So the interpretation of Paul's theology is not merely a matter of logic. According to Räisänen, Pauline scholars need to detect an experience that is more powerful than the Jewish tradition. In fact, it must be more influential than the previous religious identity.

It is very one-sided to view Paul's conversion or call experience just as a theological reorientation. Early Christianity was a charismatic movement where ecstatic experiences were daily bread, and we have good reasons to assume that Paul was not an exception.<sup>116</sup>

Therefore, Paul's theology reveals an "unconscious struggle." Räisänen states that Paul's soteriology can be explained only by "ecstatic experiences," which he underwent after becoming a member in the new charismatic Christian movement. It was an experience of freedom that later resulted in a radical theology concerning the law. According to Räisänen, Paul was a spiritualist whose theology was directed by his personal experiences. This is why his theology was in practice produced by the aforementioned "secondary rationalization."<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 232.

<sup>115</sup> See chapter 1.5. above.

<sup>116</sup> Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 233.

<sup>117</sup> Even though van Spanje is mainly interested in Räisänen's claims concerning logical consistency, he does refer to his idea of legitimization. After discussing the relevance of Berger's theory, he concludes: "Räisänen applies the above sociological concept to the inconsistencies in Paul. *He believes that the origin of the inconsistencies can be traced back in Paul's will to legitimate certain changes, for instance, the dropping of the circumcision demand for the Gentiles.*" van Spanje, *Inconsistency in Paul*, 115; italics his.

In this Räisänen differs from most previous explanations of Paul's theology. Paul has usually been interpreted as a dogmatician and a rather rational thinker who is interested in the doctrinal definition of Christian faith. According to Räisänen, Paul is now mainly driven by religious ecstasy and his writings are directed by spiritual experiences. The analysis as such concerns the alleged structure of Paul's thought. Reading the social context of Paul's mission, however, would produce quite another kind of view: at Corinth Paul needs to stand against the enthusiasts of the ecclesia. He is not championing the cause of religious ecstasy but the opponent of other spiritualists.

Räisänen puts much weight on experience in his Pauline interpretation but he constructs this new picture at the risk of inconsistency. There is one problem that is hard to avoid: are Paul's experiences to be considered real? Even Räisänen himself discusses the difficult contradiction: if there was no "plight" and Paul never felt the bondage of the law in his earlier life, why does he describe his earlier life as "slavery" and why does he cherish his new situation in the Spirit as complete freedom? Räisänen sees that his own logic of inference has not been smooth. He admits that pious Jews did experience the divine command as a demand: "the cheerful yoke of the law was, for the pious Jew, nevertheless *a yoke*." Räisänen's hesitation is understandable because, should one put much weight on experience, one would be obliged to be consistent with the description of the experience. This forces him to draw a conclusion that strictly speaking contradicts his previous conclusions in the monograph. By using two negations he states that, "it is at least not impossible" that the contrast between the 'letter of the law' and freedom in the Spirit "had something to do with a personal experience of liberation."<sup>118</sup>

This example shows that psychological interpretation is not easy. Räisänen must work on several levels at the same time. He has to take theological insights into account, even though he wants to play them down whenever possible. And he must be consistent and coherent because he cannot claim that Paul made crucial personal choices merely on the basis of vague hypotheses. If there was nothing enslaving about his former life, there could have been no true experience of liberation. But if Paul had good reasons to proclaim real freedom, did he also have good reasons to

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<sup>118</sup> Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 233. In Pauline studies this issue is important because the "new perspective" revolves around the question of whether Jews at that time experienced the Torah as a yoke or not. Even though this is not the subject of the present analysis it is worth noting that Räisänen is ready to give in to the non-Sandersian view.

describe a plight? This leads to an annoying question: was there a plight after all, against all the alleged covenantalism of his time?<sup>119</sup>

Be this as it may, the main contribution of the present chapter is in observing that Räisänen, in his Pauline studies, makes psychological reasoning a valid method of interpretation. He focuses on “secondary rationalization” even though he himself admits that the principle cannot be applied successfully to Paul’s writings. There is clear causality between Räisänen’s hermeneutics and his interpretation of Paul. Based on his cognitive theory, Räisänen treats Paul as an individual thinker who tries to find a theological explanation for his religious experiences. In this process Paul is obliged to use rationalization because the dialectic between tradition and interpretation has been disrupted by the Christological principle. This kind of psychosocial explanation is based on a Weberian reading of religion. Religion is treated as a mental structure that has no other legitimation than the one experienced in the immediate context of one’s personal life.

### 3.7. *Contribution to Contemporary Discussion III*

Investigation into the Weberian influence over biblical interpretation has shown that some of today’s themes and solutions have roots that go deep into the history of Western thinking. Furthermore, our analysis has detected certain diachronical lines of interpretation, related to the issue in question and even at times going beyond the subject itself. This is especially interesting because, as we have also seen, changing philosophical approaches have often been applied to New Testament interpretation and, therefore, one might rather expect to find development of and contradiction with previous views.

First, there is a clear connection between Strauss’s reading of Reimarus with the former’s interest in Apollonius and Greek religion on the

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<sup>119</sup> I would like to note that these questions have been posed merely for the purposes of analyzing the consistency of Räisänen’s theory. I personally do not think that the Sandersian definition of “plight” in Jewish religion is properly constructed. In my estimation, Jewish groups in the Second Temple period differ significantly from each other, and covenantal nomism as a current fits probably only the Sadducees and some Torah-teachers at that time. Even Sirach takes his own route, to say nothing of the Qumran theologians or the adherents of different apocalyptic groups. The question about Jewish nomism cannot be simplified to the degree that Sanders’ and Räisänen’s theories suggest. I have not found one group in that period that would teach that eschatological salvation would be possible *without* obedience to Torah.

one hand, and the nineteenth century history-of-religions school that attempted to explain Christian religion with the help of Greek mystery religions (Wellhausen, Bousset) on the other. Weber, writing under the influence of the history-of-religions school, appears to build his sociology of religion mainly on this view of religion in general and Christianity in particular. Second, when Berger develops Weberian ideas, he never questions his basic understanding of the nature of religion. Instead, in *The Social Construction of Reality* he affirms the approach by classifying mythical religions in a traditional way. In this respect, the history-of-religion school's understanding of religion—as well as the relationships between different religions—still affects this quite recent sociology of knowledge reading of religion.

Third, we have noted that Räsänen too builds on Reimarian ideas and fails to make good use of the new post-War emphasis on Jewish studies. He does sometimes mention the issue, and he openly follows Sanders who has made this shift in scholarship his guiding star, but Räsänen does not let it change his view on religion or his conception of early Christianity. He still exploits history-of-religions views about the development of early Christology, for instance, and makes Paul a Hellenist about several issues.

Weber and the adherents of nineteenth century historical-critical investigation of the Bible share an immanent view of Christian tradition. They have bequeathed us a heritage of reductionism. If all religious ideas found in the Bible are treated merely as products of society, does this not mean that a religious statement can be reduced to a human construction? As we have seen in Berger's hermeneutics, this is precisely the case. Propositional divine revelation is considered an impossibility. Religious statements are seen as the product of human reasoning. There may have existed—and probably was as even he admits—an original experience in the beginning but after that, everything is mere reflection. For Berger, the Bible has no special place in this issue because it does not represent the core experience itself.

Räsänen has said all this already at the beginning of the 1970s, although his arguments were different. Religious experience may be the product of fervent faith but this no longer is significant for the biblical interpreter. Räsänen builds both his theory and his investigations on the claim that theology—even though directed by tradition—changes according to the crises of the community. A theological system is a collection of symbols, and these symbols are constructed in terms of the “social reality of religion,” as Berger too says. According to Räsänen, theology is reduced to



sociology, and beliefs are reduced to a function of the community. Theological “reality” is a social construction.

How does Räsänen treat New Testament passages that express experiences of something that is transcendental or supernatural? What does he do with the person of Jesus, the reality of miracles, or Christological statements? He is destined to provide a reductionist interpretation of all these. In chapter 2 we saw what this means in practice (cf. also chapter 6 below). *Entmythologisierung*, as such, already implies a reduction. The rejection of divine inspiration and the authority of the Bible (themes which Räsänen treats in his *Authority*) are also results of this reduction. Then Räsänen extends it to a theological reduction, which appears in his treatment of Christology and soteriology. The question of reductionism is so important that we shall return to it later.

The essential contribution of the present analysis concerns the nominalist element of Berger’s theory. Sociology of religion is based on phenomenological epistemology, and it produces a nominalist hermeneutic. In other words, the conceptual world (symbolic world) or a religion is considered a closed and independent system. It is a human construction and consists of human imagining of religious ideas. As ideas change over centuries, the diachronic flow of culture brings up new beliefs that inevitably drift into conflict with previous ideas. This explanation is nominalist because no phase in the evolution of religious culture can be absolutized. No belief, doctrine, or creed can be given priority over the other ones. Such nominalist hermeneutics then confuses religion and culture, church and society.

Why do Weber and Berger assume that cultural and ideological changes should be seen also as religious changes? The answer will not be an easy one, but it is illuminating. The basic point of departure is not at all clear. The confessional identity of the major churches has not changed remarkably over the course of time. The ancient “symbols” of the Christian church, especially the Apostolic creed focusing on Trinitarian faith in God, his Son, and the Holy Spirit, are still considered the main creeds of contemporary churches. Soteriology has not changed, and even the sacraments maintain their central position in the life of these churches. Sociologists’ claim about the essential change in Christian religion simply does not appear to hold. One begins to suspect that the sociology of religion wants to investigate something other than religion itself.

This is how we end up with the problems and inconsistencies that essentially weaken the Weberian sociology of religion. Sociological hermeneutics appears to focus on *changes in the society and culture*, not on changes in a particular religion. The analysis is no longer a sociology of religion as



such, but cultural history or a history of ideas. For instance changes in the Western conception of science or world view are being read into the religion, particularly Christianity. Religion, in this case, is studied as a form of culture and culture, respectively, is studied as a form of religion. These two become identified with each other in a peculiar way.

Weberian hermeneutics has always claimed that religion should in fact be investigated as a form of human interpretation of reality. As we saw above, Weber adopted the Comtean view about the development of Western culture and explained it as an evolutionary movement. Magical and theological interpretations must give way to a rational explanation of reality. As the positivist understanding of life prevails, religions die out. According to this view, which is also adopted by Berger, religious culture will gradually change into secular culture. In rationalist, desacralized society people explain life without metaphysical presuppositions. This alone can justify the above-mentioned claim: religion has always been only a form of culture.

Sociological hermeneutics thus ends up with a complete reduction: *social and ideological changes are treated like religious changes because religion itself is understood merely as a function of society.* Social reality creates and recreates religion. This is how Berger and Räsänen are able to claim that later interpretations, new social ideologies, rationalism, or even demythologizing, are important religious issues. New views are considered modifying factors despite the fact that they usually originate in the academic world and social sciences—not religion itself. This is paradoxical because scholars simultaneously admit that religious institutions, even the current Christian churches, still rely on traditional confessions of faith. The development of culture that is at the heart of Weberian cultural hermeneutics, thus, has not changed religions even though it may have changed the ways that some individuals think. The most apparent change, to be sure, can be found in scientific and cultural societies.<sup>120</sup>

This probably also accounts for the revolutionary aspect to Berger's and Räsänen's Weberian hermeneutics. They are not interested in stating that social change would already have changed the extant churches—probably even the contrary is true. Instead, Berger and Räsänen appear to think that social change that is considered the only true development in Western culture *should* change Christianity and different churches that still stick to premodern ideas. The ultimate aim of Weberian hermeneutics is

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<sup>120</sup> The implications of this crucial feature will be discussed later in chapter 10.2.

to inspire an ideological rebellion against traditional Christian faith. Both Berger and Räsänen clearly assume that social change should also alter conservative institutions.

These notions confirm the findings of this analysis. Berger's Weberian sociology of religion does not in fact study religion. It may present some science-of-religion explanations of certain general religious subjects like theodicy, soteriology, or religious violence. Nevertheless, such an investigation is not interested in the religious identity of any particular confessional group. It never delves into creeds or historical confessions. Instead, the focus is on the contradiction between the alleged ancient religious system and modern ideas. Räsänen follows suit and suggests that the idea of a chain of interpretation explains the development as well as the process of distancing. This is why both of these scholars speak of the "heretical imperative" that has now become a hermeneutical principle. Changed social and ideological perspectives are considered the new heresies that gradually replace traditional Christian faith. Sociology, in this phase, has been moved aside because it is now the contemporary institutional Christianity that is rejected. New views or new symbolic worlds replace traditional faith. Religion, in Weberian theory, is a mental structure, not an institution with confessions. As a result these writers actually attempt to justify heresy in the extant institutions (churches) because, in practice, these are the only places where Christian faith still exists. I hope it will not be considered patronizing to remark at this point that this is not sociology but an ideology.

Furthermore, sociological readings based on an immanent approach constantly produce dualistic solutions. Sociological hermeneutics, be it Bultmann's or Berger's, has attempted escape from this difficult situation by making a distinction between human tradition and apophatic human experience. Religion's transcendental legitimation has been transferred to the latter resulting in spiritualist versions of Christian theology.

This sounds Kantian, and there is a reason. Both Weber and German theologians in the neo-Kantian tradition build on early phenomenology that defines religion as an *a priori* phenomenon. In the Kantian interpretation of religion, there is no true knowledge about God that would rely on *a posteriori* information, historical documents like the Bible, or any historical religion. In this metaphysical religious phenomenology, religion itself, however, is held to be a true phenomenon that can be met through inner experience.

It is surprising that Räsänen adopts a similar approach in some cases, when he speaks about the original diversity of Christianity. He makes a

distinction between inner experience and verbal expression. One of the most important examples for Räsänen here is Paul. The apostle, so Räsänen states, has created his whole grand system of sin, law, and justification with the help of secondary rationalization. The ecstatic experience focusing on the resurrected Christ as a heavenly spirit first awakened Paul to the possibility that his inherited form of Jewish faith had to be problematic. He then developed a confused system of disparagement, playing down his previous convictions. But just as Berger's Barthian dualism gradually gives way to methodological atheism, Räsänen remains ambivalent about whether religious experience really has any transcendental point of reference.

Such dualism must be considered a *petitio principii* of immanent hermeneutics. If the sociological approach is the main point of departure with methodological atheism emphasizing religion as a human construction, it is no wonder that the only place to locate divine revelation is the apophatic realm, inner experience as the ineffable reality of human existence. Such an approach leaves little room for a truly theological treatment of religion. Certain examples in the sociology of religion tradition have proven this methodological dilemma perfectly.

The sociology of religion did not remain in the sphere of sociology itself, though. Instead, Weber's and Durkheim's approaches and ideas have later been developed in the science of religion. Some might even state that, in the beginning, no other approach was available until more philosophical ideologies entered into the methodology. Moreover, even early versions of the sociology of religion were heavily dependent on the premises in the philosophy of religion. In what follows, we shall discuss some of these questions in light of Berger's and Räsänen's hermeneutics.

Weber no doubt had a good insight when he decided to focus on religious precepts and theodicies. Many extant religions attempt to solve the discrepancy/contradiction etc between the ideal of human well-being and the factual state of affairs in the world. If the conditions of life on this planet should resemble a paradise, as religions often presuppose, why do people constantly need to deal with all these imperfections that make their life difficult and even dangerous? Weber was right in assuming that this kind of hermeneutical horizon reveals something essential in a religion's structure.

Berger took this line of thought further. He stated that the basic problem concerns religion's conception of God. If this world is controlled by a Supreme Being and directed by the *Summum Bonum* the question arises, where do all the imperfections come from? The question is familiar from the philosophy of religion. Why is God's world not perfect? Berger's

explanation focused on two poles, the construction of a *nomos* and the creation of theodicies.

This Weberian approach to religion is not solely sociological. It builds on significant philosophy-of-religion premises. First of all, in Berger's version especially, scholars assume that the need to construct a *nomos* is based mainly on the idea that Divine Being is incapable of properly maintaining the world. Therefore, Berger states, this is primarily a problem concerning the concept of God, not the life of man as such. Sociology of religion, thus, wishes to explain how religions solve the classical problem of theodicy: can a world with evil elements have a good God? This is not merely a question about the imperfections of life.

The philosophy of religion issue, however, concerns the imperfections of life. Should they be considered real faults and problems even without a concept of God? Many scholars take the Nietzschean view and assume that they should not. For them, this is not a matter of explaining the difficulties of human life but, rather, a matter of reconciling life as it happens and the concept of God that the religion has adopted. In other words, to use the term many religions suggest here, this is the problem of sin. Can sin be considered a real element in human life—even without any concept of God—or should it be considered merely a tension between the concept of an Omnipotent God and the imperfections of life?

Most communities express an awareness of the need for morality independently of the nature of their religious or ideological commitment. This is true even of some modern individuals. Atheists and naturalists alike appear to assume that ethics even in a life without God are necessary. In this respect Berger's theory is not quite consistent. It is not primarily the concept of God that proves problematic in a religion, but the reality of the imperfections of life, or sin, to keep to religious discourse.

In these theories theodicy, therefore, is not simply a matter of justifying the concept of God in a particular religion. Instead, it is a more comprehensive theological construction where anthropology and morality are discussed from theistic point of departure. Weber and his followers, and for some reason also Berger, never discussed the origin of sin in their works. In their treatment of theodicy they did not consider whether the Fall should be regarded as significant in the soteriological structure of Christianity. This is why the sociology of religion, and Berger's sociology of knowledge in particular, builds on a biased theological conviction that is reductionist in this issue as well as the others we have discussed. And as we have seen, Räsänen abandons the concept of sin (or hereditary sin) in his naturalist hermeneutics.

As far as theological hermeneutics is considered, the sociology of knowledge is thus a dead end for biblical interpretation. Since the symbolic world that stands for the doctrinal content of religion is considered to be just a human construction that lacks theological validity for later communities, such a sociological approach cannot provide any material for the dogmatic work of later theologians. The only possibility left to this new tradition is a constant revisioning. The heretical imperative forces theologians to appropriate their tradition in new contexts and even contradict their own ideological commitments which might be in line with the earlier commitments of the Christian church. As noted already before, this leads to the apophatic nihilism of the death-of-God theology or Taylor's a/theology.

All in all, these elements prove that the field of hermeneutics is divided. The main dichotomy concerns the issue of theoretical reduction. Only certain scholars accept Weberian reductionism. The analysis made here explains how the sociological theory has emerged and helps its critical assessment. The sociology of knowledge is based on an immanent reduction. It has become a doctrine without which sociological interpretation cannot live. The principle is implied in the concept of the symbolic world. This is why the theory itself cannot be discussed without taking this result into account. Simultaneously, this analysis shows that interpretation theories that do not make reduction a *sine qua non* will develop quite in another direction. According to several recent scholars, the process of interpreting ancient texts is more a textual matter than an ideological enterprise based on world views.

The study of history and any past human action differs from science with its laboratory-conditioned experiments that can be reproduced in any place at any time. The investigation of religion and especially interpretation of the Bible is a matter of reading the documents that have been left to us by the generations who have lived before us. History, archaeology, and linguistics must work with meaningful marks that people have left behind. Thus the study of a particular religion means studying its documents. There is no direct path to history or human behavior in the past.

Therefore, biblical interpretation is above all a task of investigating the sources of religion, its meaningful signs, systems of signs, words and sentences. This means that in the past there has been encoding and what we now have in our hands is the message written in a particular language, in the case of the New Testament ancient Greek. The task of the historian and the interpreter is to decode the original message and attempt to reconstruct the motives and purposes of writing. As the new

structuralist truism states: the medium is never the message. Investigation is a dialectical process concerning signification and interpretation, writing and reading.

A new consciousness about this point of departure has opened to literary approaches and linguistic methods in New Testament scholarship. Traditional historical criticism is often considered insufficient as a methodological tool because for the most part, it has been interested only in the structure and construction of the sources, not their content. Many scholars now believe that it is incapable of answering the questions that our new context poses. Therefore, rhetorics, narratology, and semiotics have entered the stage, and the whole process of interpreting ancient texts is seen quite in a new light.

The sociological investigation of religion, assessed from this point of view, has always—so it appears—applied principles that impose a naturalist reduction to the study of religion. Its methodological atheism has not secured objective study but, instead, led to theological reductions: religious issues have been given a social or prosaic explanation. But is there an alternative? How should one interpret religious texts? Are there any other approaches than the one focusing on human action? The answer is easy even in the sphere of science of religion. The sociological approach is only one method among many others, just to mention a few: philosophical, anthropological, phenomenological, feminist, psychological, and theological. The insistence on reduction is ideological, not purely scientific even though it probably was presented as such during Weber's time.

The investigation of religion in general and the interpretation of the Bible in particular is today often understood as a task that must be done with an appreciation of the religion that is studied. An empathetic approach is popular because it is considered the best way to understand what the religion believes. Objectivity in this case means that the scholar does not need to believe in the doctrines and views the religion proposes but he needs to try to understand them. This is where literary methods and structuralist approaches become very helpful.

And what do the texts represent? Religious texts reveal an identity that is directed by particular confessions and beliefs. The New Testament does this clearly and effectively. These beliefs concern God, human beings, salvation, the world as such, human aspirations, and the future of humankind. The true nature of a religion, and especially of the congregations that produced the New Testament, can be found by interpreting the commitment that the texts express. Believers subscribe to certain beliefs and exclude others that are often defined in detail.

Our analysis contributes to the discussion about the sociology of religion by recognizing and drawing out the deep divisions within the field. Following Milbank's analyses and criticism of Weberian influence in the dogmatic tradition we can state that a similar discussion needs to be conducted in the sphere of New Testament interpretation. In the reductionist sociological interpretation where the symbolic world as a doctrinal system is held to be a merely human, time-bound construction, theology itself is reduced to and transformed into culture.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### IT IS ALL SIGNS: READING POSTSTRUCTURALISM

Immanent reading can take many forms. Sociological structuralism, treated above, was but a part of the poststructuralist movement, especially in France. At first, the genesis and existence of meanings were located in the sphere of the society—or particular societies. Gradually, however, a new understanding of language systems took over, and meanings were limited to intrasystemic functions. When metaphysics is excluded from the picture, it is believed that people speak of language, not reality. Nominalistic poststructuralism became an influential movement that also changed approaches to theology. Even though Räsänen has written most of his books focusing on historical criticism and aiming at some kind of historical reconstruction, his writings also have features that reflect this linguistic turn. His hermeneutics depend on ideas that sometimes veer closely to the theses of the poststructuralist movement. The task of the present chapter is to investigate how he succeeds in combining two approaches that differ so essentially from each other.

#### 4.1. *Räsänen and the Linguistic Turn: Against Logocentricism*

Considering Räsänen's rationalistic historicism and the methodological "atheism" he adopted from Bultmann, it might be difficult to imagine that he would express the core of his own hermeneutical theory in terms of later continental philosophy—but he does. Towards the end of the *Beyond*, when summarizing his views and attempting to define the leading theme of his new thinking, Räsänen calls his hermeneutics phenomenology.

In summary, it may be more suitable to characterize the project described as a *phenomenology* of early Christian religious thought than as its history.<sup>1</sup>

Phenomenology, of course can mean many different things, and it is not self-evident what it means for Räsänen here. He probably refers to the "phenomenon" of religion, a social fact that appears in the community, which enables an empirical treatment. The focusing on phenomena,

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<sup>1</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, 118; italics his.



however, always implies the belief that the weight is on personal observation. This is why Räsänen cannot escape the conditions twentieth century European phenomenology has provided for interpretation theory. Therefore, the very use of the term in such a crucial passage in his *Beyond* provokes questions concerning his relationship to the post-Husserlian phenomenological movements in Western hermeneutical tradition, be they Heideggerian or Derridean.

It was not long after the Second World War that language, textuality, and narrative became the very center of study in almost all areas of textual or cultural studies. Greimas and Genette had already focused on the structure of narratives for some decades, creating the tradition of early structuralism. Lévi-Strauss applied a structuralist approach to cultural anthropology, and Jakobson developed similar ideas in the area of semantics and communication theory. Structuralism soon became a major factor in others fields, like comparative literature.<sup>2</sup>

During the revolutionary decade of the 1960s in France, structuralism went through a metamorphosis, however. Derrida attacked the logocentric tradition of the West, as he called it. Barthes, in turn, confronted the "theological" nature of any metaphysical sign exploited in the flow of culture. And Lyotard, finally, provided the terminology that was to become the standard for a whole generation of scholars proclaiming the postmodern turn and the "incredulity towards metanarratives."<sup>3</sup> The new turn was a revolution but it was no longer about economic power. Instead, as Lyotard put it, this was a battle over the definitions of knowledge.

Post/modern, as a critique of the modern, cannot be easily defined. There are too many ways to view the modern and too many possibilities to construct an ideology that builds only on negation. It is hard to define something that keeps postulating discontinuity without proposing one clear ideology in the stead of the previous one. Poststructuralism, however, is an easier subject. This French movement stated that the indefiniteness of the sign deprived language of its universal meaning. Words refer to words, and language speaks of language. Epistemologically, nothing bridges language to reality.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On the history of structuralism, see Selden-Widdowson-Brooker, *Literary Theory*, 150–187; also in general, Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 131–152.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 10–21; 60–61.

<sup>4</sup> Today these definitions are especially important since postmodernism as a cultural current has ceased to be a relevant source of influence. For the analyses on the decline of postmodern thought, see especially Norris, *What's wrong with Postmodernism*.

This is how culture, philosophy, and theology became a playground for autonomous discourses and language games. If we treat postmodernism as a kind of poststructuralism, the new approach can be defined with sufficient precision. Harrison-Carter has summarized postmodern thought neatly following the ideas of Lyotard and her informative summary goes as follows (the term she uses is postmodern but the examples are mostly taken from the poststructuralist movement):

Where modernists value synthesis and comprehensiveness, postmodernists value deconstruction and fragmentation... Where modernists esteem a personal ideal of responsible agency and integrity, postmodernists reject "the authentic self" as an illusion, an attempt to reify a mere collocation and ensemble of social roles. [...] Where modernists think foundationally, and believe objective truths can be discovered, postmodernists think anti-foundationally. They believe that truths are constructed by social groups and their languages; dismiss science and philosophy as totalizing "metanarratives;" and view history as nothing more than "a network of language games." Indeed, at the very core of postmodernist ideology is the assertion that language is a self-referential "prison house" which cannot take in truths about the world outside, but can only construct meanings out of itself. There can be no transcendent Logos; the only reality is virtual reality.<sup>5</sup>

The philosophical idea of deconstruction and its later pragmatic development in deconstructionist theory are well known in the recent history of philosophy. The Derridean tradition of dismantling hierarchies has become a norm, and it is still used as a tool for postmodern hermeneutics. The philosophical point of departure is complex, though, and it is necessary first to investigate some essential principles before comparing philosophical tradition and Räisänen's theory.

Poststructuralist phenomenology cannot be discussed without mentioning Derrida. Even though it is not easy to present his theory or theories succinctly, some of the main features can be brought into the discussion. First of all, Derrida is a Husserlian philosopher. He has adopted many of Husserl's central ideas despite the fact that he often gives them a new interpretation. Phenomenology, for these philosophers, is not about

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<sup>5</sup> See Harrison-Carter, *Religion and Modern Thought*. We must remember, however, that this is just a description of some currents in the postmodern movement. Practically all of the above-mentioned points can be questioned in philosophy—and have been questioned already. The autonomy of language does not hold, and values are not all abandoned in postmodern currents but reinstated. McHale notes that even the term itself does not signify much since it depends on a negation, McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 4. Many scholars hold it to be just a new myth of counter-culture that justifies their ambition, Calinescu, *Five Faces*, 266.

theories or causalities. Their line of investigation is concerned with one's experience of this world. It asks how things appear to us. After this, it focuses on the operations of the mind. In order to achieve this goal, Husserl performs a "phenomenological reduction" (*epokhē*). He states that anything that could be regarded metaphysical or theoretical should be bracketed. The investigation must concentrate on the so-called absolutely given which manifests itself to us originally in intuition. "Only through a reduction, the same one we have already called phenomenological reduction, do I attain an absolute datum which no longer presents anything transcendent."<sup>6</sup>

Derrida adopts the principle of the phenomenological reduction and, following Husserl, investigates the understanding of the manifestations of reality by excluding all metaphysical premises. He is not completely content with Husserl's theory, though. Derrida believes that the immediate intuition is unable to provide information about the "absolutely given," which, naturally, represents the object.<sup>7</sup> Quite the contrary, Derrida wants to separate absolute meaning from the investigation of manifestations completely. Here, already in his early writings, he exploits his emerging theory of *différance*, speaking about the deferring of meaning in the process of signification. Because meaning or sense is constantly moving it cannot even in principle be static or present. "Sense, being temporal in nature, as Husserl recognized, is never simply present; it is always already engaged in the 'movement' of the trace, that is, in the order of 'signification'.<sup>8</sup>

A critical position towards Heidegger was also inevitable now. One must bear in mind that Heidegger and Derrida wrote from within the same current of thought. For Derrida, the Being of beings "can never be presented." Intuition in one's mind is merely a *trace* of Being. Neither can there be an actual manifestation of the trace, because it will appear only through *différance*, always escaping other manifestations and deferring meaning in the linguistic system.

As rigorously as possible we must permit to appear/disappear the trace of what exceeds the truth of Being. The trace (of that) which can never be presented, the trace which itself can never be presented: that is, appear and manifest itself, as such, in its phenomenon. The trace beyond that which

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<sup>6</sup> Husserl, *Idea of Phenomenology*, 34. Such a reduction also means a shift "from things to their meanings." *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. phenomenology.

<sup>7</sup> See Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 6–7.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 85.

profoundly links fundamental ontology and phenomenology. Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating, like the a writing itself, inscribing its pyramid in *différance*.<sup>9</sup>

To explicate this as simply as possible, Derrida thinks that an appearance produces a trace in our minds, and this trace keeps escaping the reality of the occurrence. For Derrida, interpretation is a process where reality cannot be present and cannot become manifest as such. What is left are interpretations which are treated by the mind. These interpretations are further organized with the help of a system of signs. The trace will be represented by a sign which in itself is already part of another system.<sup>10</sup>

Derrida believes that the sign itself, as a part of the system of linguistic signs, has also been born through the movement of *différance*. This is why it cannot represent the object in terms of immediate presence. Therefore, also the trace—and not merely the object—remains unreachable and is left outside language. What can be said about signs in Derrida's theory is, at most, that they are kinds of names for mental images. While speech is possible only by the help of signs, it can never actually reach reality as it is.<sup>11</sup>

Later Derrida, in his collection *Writing and Difference*, suggests a discursivist solution and states that a closed system leaves room only for some kind of play, a discourse: "a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely."<sup>12</sup> This is also where

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<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *Margins*, 23. The neologism *différance* is not an easy word. It has been derived from the French verb "différer." The word means deferring and moving forward, moving farther. In Derrida's neologism, however, the French suffix "-ance" denotes a participle, and the word is a noun. So *différance* expresses constant deferring. The basic linguistic idea here is that, phonetically, this neologism sounds exactly like the French word "différence." So Derrida combines these two aspects in one word. Difference is constant deferring. There is movement in dissimilarity. See especially *Margins*, 3–5. Cf. Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 97.

<sup>10</sup> Derrida never discusses the genesis of words in the linguistic system. He just passes over the difficult question about the relation between lexical words and reality or presence. We shall return to this question in 7.2.

<sup>11</sup> "It is precisely a question of something entirely other: it is the tie between truth and presence that must be thought, in a thought that henceforth may no longer need to be either *true* or *present*, and for which the meaning and value of truth are put into question . . ." Derrida, *Margins*, 38. In his article *Différance* Derrida simply states that there are no "conscious" traces; *Margins*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 280.

his hermeneutics ends: people speak of language. Meanings are meanings that live in the system only.

But how do meanings emerge? How can meanings be ascribed to words? Both Husserl and Derrida have encountered the contradiction between the extant language system and the phenomenological idea of creating meanings. Therefore, they have been forced to construct a dualistic view on language. As regards the system itself, it is always at hand. It must be regarded as kind of "raw" language, indicative language that actually has no proper meaning at all even though it can be used in everyday speech.

What phenomenologists focus on is expressive language. Husserl states that people are directed to phenomena. Intentional consciousness experiences the phenomenon as "given." Even though language (or sign) always has its indicative level in the system, the expressive function of language means that the speaking subject wishes also to express itself. "One would thus be assured that the meaning (*Bedeutung*) is always what a discourse or somebody *wants to say*."<sup>13</sup>

Meaning, for Husserl and Derrida, is not merely a Kantian, rational thing belonging to the noumenal sphere. It is not merely an object of thinking or reasoning. Thinking and knowledge are separate things. Therefore, meaning is a product of phenomenology. It is constructed when the phenomenon is experienced. This is why one can say that expressive meaning especially concerns the meaning of phenomena, but indicative meaning concerns all possible referring that takes place outside the *epokhē*, the phenomenological reduction. There is a restriction, however: human knowledge concerns merely the reality of phenomena.<sup>14</sup>

The distinction between indicative and expressive language reveals one interesting feature in Husserl's and Derrida's thought. These scholars still subscribed to the semantic principle of "primitive reference." Words, in their indicative role, simply referred to objects and meaning could not be treated apart from this indicative level. There was no distinction between meaning and reference. This is the reason why these primitive words could be ascribed new meanings in an intentional act. This setting, then, creates problems for Derrida. He has to treat words in two separate roles:

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<sup>13</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Why does Husserl work with these two functions of language? He never says that some signs as such would be expressive and other ones indicative. Rather, the whole language, according to Husserl, seems to have an indicative level. Theoretical language outside the phenomenological reduction is indicative. This is why, for Husserl, only the language of intentional consciousness is expressive and has a meaning (*Bedeutung*).

first as signs that express the reality of phenomena and, second, as entities of the language system (where new signs are constructed by *différance*).

There is a special dynamic behind Derrida's concept of meaning. As far as Husserl's own theory of meaning is considered, intentional acts of consciousness have a structure of meaning, a "noematic structure," or simply a *noema*, as Derrida calls it. When a mental act is directed at an object, for instance at a book or at a computer, the mode of directedness is always constructed by a *noema*. Or, to keep it simple, a *noema* is being constructed every time a mental act is directed at an object. As a result, each different *noema* has a "meaning" on the grounds by which it is linked to the object. So it is not the object itself which directs meaning, but the way the object manifests itself as a phenomenon. The link to reality has been lost. Therefore, the structure of meaning is constantly changing, since it depends on the changing manifestation.<sup>15</sup>

For Derrida meanings are constructed in the mental acts of *noemata*. This creates a problem with semantics because Derrida also puts much weight on the language system. Linguists have asked, how could we have words without meaning (even a lexical meaning)? These difficult issues must be dealt with later. What is essential here, is the question concerning theological language. If meaning is in constant movement, how should one define the signification process itself?

To start with the question concerning a "theological" concept of *logos*, one needs to go back to the claim that the linguistic system is autonomic. If constant deferring, *différance*, produces new signs, meaning must somehow be a matter of the system. And it is. Derrida states that such a making of signs produces semantic oppositions inside the extant system. There are no empirical reasons for linguistic signs but all signs are produced merely inside the web of words. Therefore, all signs refer only to other signs in the system. As we saw, reality itself cannot be reached. In Derrida's tradition, God is merely a sign. As opposites, all are artificially constructed signs, including the signs of good and evil, are bound to each other by the power of *différance*.<sup>16</sup>

Relying on the idea of *noema*, Derrida especially attacked *logocentrism*. The concept of *logos* means in this case a stable, unchangeable, "created," meaning. This is where theology enters the picture because, for Derrida, *logos* has always been a theological concept. The belief that

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<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida developed his theory especially in his *Of Grammatology*.

language really has a proper referential meaning implies a conviction that there is a created universe with divine origin. Several poststructuralist convictions are highly relevant for theology in this respect.

Meaning, according to Derrida—as well as epistemology—is influenced by the world view. This is what he emphasizes in his famous slogan in the early collection *Of Grammatology*: “The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological.”<sup>17</sup> If one is to assume that the justification of the so-called transcendental signified has depended on a Christian concept of God, then the concept of God is inevitably dependent on a sign.<sup>18</sup>

As a radicalized phenomenologist Derrida assumes that language cannot reach beyond its own limits. It is very difficult for language to describe sense data, to say nothing of descriptions of the metaphysical. Therefore, theological signs and the God-sign remain inside language. And even more importantly, they remain inside the discourse of a particular religion. The God-sign, thus, is merely a sign belonging to a deceased discourse. It is a *simulacrum*, in Derridean terminology, a picture of an object that never actually existed.<sup>19</sup>

This is not too far from the hermeneutics of the Bultmannian tradition that was investigated in the previous chapter. Derrida performs an *Entmythologisierung* when he states that theological language has no real object. His ideas resemble those of Bultmann who was convinced that all theological and metaphysical statements of the Bible were mere culturally dependent myths. They have no content that would be significant for later generations. It is the task of Christian theology to abandon the *logos*, so to speak, and create new interpretations. Derrida might say that it means the creation of new signs in the religious system. Both thinkers appear to be convinced that theological signs remain inside the linguistic system and cannot be transferred forward. As this necessarily happens in every

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 14. The statement as such is usually linked with Nietzsche. Derrida's theory about meaning cannot be treated here in detail. Actually he had adopted Husserl's idea according to which the whole dichotomy between lexical meaning and referential meaning had to be rejected. Therefore, his understanding of the so-called referential meaning had been reduced to the naming of phenomena. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 18–22.

<sup>18</sup> For a theological discussion, see for instance the introduction in *Deconstruction and Theology*, viii. This book was a theological imitation of *Deconstruction and Criticism*, a collection of essays by Yale critics following Derrida, written in 1979.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Derrida, *Margins*, 23–24.



stage of tradition, one could probably conclude that it gradually creates a chain of interpretation.

As the idea of a chain seems to be essential for twentieth-century continental hermeneutics, one should turn next to the investigation of intertextual criticism. There are several schools of interpretation concerning the treatment of intertextual relations. In the French school Julia Kristeva introduced the term “intertextuality.” She started with an idea of textual surfaces and developed it into the theory of a mosaic of quotations. Kristeva was no longer interested in the traditional idea of deciphering sources behind a writing. Instead, in her theory the “text” is understood as a large cultural system that influences every writer.

The term inter-textuality denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of “study of sources,” we prefer the term *transposition* because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the thetic—of enunciative and denontative positionality.<sup>20</sup>

A similar polarization between source-intertextualism and pantextualism is proposed by Roland Barthes. He considered the text to be a woven fabric consisting of countless echoes of culture.

Every text, being itself the intertext of another text, belongs to the intertextual, which must not be confused with a text’s origins: to search for the “sources of” and “influence upon” a work is to satisfy the myth of filiation.<sup>21</sup>

In Barthes’ poststructuralist view, the *text* is in fact a product of reading, and it is located between the writing and the reader. It belongs to the process of reading, not to the writing itself.<sup>22</sup> While Bakhtin’s influence can still be perceived in Kristeva’s conception of transparent layers of textual surfaces, Barthes’ has departed from this tradition and separated the text from the writing.

In literary theory, these ideas developed later into the reader-response approach. In the Derridean tradition Stanley Fish in particular has developed a reader-centered theory where all reading is interpreted in terms of a skillful reader. Fish assumes that, in language and in literature, meaning keeps moving. Text itself has no permanent meaning. All we have are sequences of words that can be interpreted in several different ways.

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<sup>20</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution*, 59–60.

<sup>21</sup> Barthes, *Textual Strategies*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> Barthes, *Textual Strategies*, 73ff.



If one assumes that there is a structure in a certain text, then one finds it there. This view is rather radical, though. Fish is convinced that any text can be given an endless number of meanings with the same method. Reading, for him, is not a process of decoding but encoding.

Skilled reading is usually thought to be a matter of discerning what is there, but if the example of my students can be generalized, it is a matter of knowing how to *produce* what can thereafter be said to be there [...] Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them.<sup>23</sup>

A poststructuralist theory of reading no longer treats textual conventions or literary structures. There is no rhetorical force in ancient writings. What is left are the rules of interpretation. Culler has later noted that this is no longer an interpretation of texts but the interpretation of interpretations.<sup>24</sup> These approaches reflect the basic direction of post-Husserlian phenomenology. Therefore, it is important to assess what is Räsänen's relation to such views, since he claims to be a phenomenologist.

Superficially, this sounds similar to Räsänen's idea of the chain of interpretation. During the same decade when poststructuralist ideology in Europe flourished, Räsänen stated that there is no signification that could as such be transferred to later generations. First of all, the author is dead. There is no universal meaning or universal truth in ancient texts. For Räsänen, there is not much point in attempting to reconstruct the ideas of the original New Testament writers. Even though one could in principle succeed in making such a reconstruction, it would be of no use for the hermeneutical process. Räsänen probably did not consider the author as completely dead as Barthes suggests but, for Räsänen, the author is certainly mute. As regards conceptual meaning, the author needs not to be consulted with.

Second, the text, according to Räsänen, is an autonomous entity floating on the stream of culture. It has its history and genealogy, of course, and these can be investigated by the help of historical study. Meanings, however, are being constructed constantly anew in new situations and changed contexts. Räsänen's idea of a chain refers naturally to previous links in the same chain. Simultaneously, it points also to a completely new

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<sup>23</sup> Fish, *Text*, 327. Cf. Crozman: "Meaning is made precisely as we *want* it to be made, and as usual we want different things." Crozman, *Reader in the Text*, 164.

<sup>24</sup> Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 113f.; Selden-Widdowson-Brooker, *Literary Theory*, 81–83.

sphere. The new link is an entity of its own. This is why there is a strong flavor of intertextualism in his theory.<sup>25</sup>

In this respect Räsänen must assume that, in religious language, there is no “transcendental signified.” There is no *logos* that would give biblical writings any stable and unchanging meaning. He sees the process of signification in a new way.<sup>26</sup> Even though Räsänen never identifies himself particularly as a post-structuralist, his ideas reveal several analogical features with that tradition. For Räsänen, there is no universal truth in biblical texts. Instead, any reading of an ancient text for Räsänen, as for Kristeva and Barthes, is a hypertext producing new meanings. For all of these thinkers, such a reading has nothing to do with interpreting sources or making use of quotations. Hence, Räsänen’s concept of the chain of interpretation closely resembles Barthes’ idea of “woven fabric.” In Räsänen’s work, the echoes of culture become the theological echoes of religious experience. Links in the chain are seen as autonomous readings producing new reality.

Furthermore, Räsänen’s interpretation theory appears to resemble reader-response criticism. According to Räsänen, readers no longer decode the theology of the New Testament. Instead, they encode new theology by rewriting and revising theological tradition. Why is this a parallel to the postmodern approach? The reason is obvious: Räsänen does not speak merely of enriching a tradition or new interpretations of previous doctrines. He has adopted an epistemology similar to that of the poststructuralists. There is no detectable or meaningful content in New Testament teachings. The sign, for Räsänen, is empty. The possibility of decoding has been rejected completely. Readers provide meanings and, therefore, the only existing possibility is the chain of interpretation. For Räsänen, new situations inevitably produce new interpretations. As Culler noted, this kind of view constitutes an interpretation of interpretations.

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<sup>25</sup> I do not mean any particular passage in Räsänen’s writings here but, rather, the general train of thought in his *Authority* as well as some other early writings that were discussed in chapter 2.

<sup>26</sup> This issue will be discussed also later but it is useful to notice here that Räsänen treats particular religious words mainly in terms of primitive reference. There may be concepts that religious words represent but these concepts are void because they have no reference. According to primitive reference theory the meaning of a word is its object. If there is no object, also the concept itself is non-existent. Words become detached labels that can only be taken into new use in renewed contexts: meanings change because there has never been any referential content even in previous history. In this respect Räsänen appears to think that religious words only have a lexical meaning (and this leads to the theory of intrasystemic meaning).

All this is somewhat surprising because Räsänen never explicitly changes his epistemology. Also in his later writings he rather confirms his convictions about the reliability of the traditional historical-critical methodology. He accepts its view about the relation between language and reality. Räsänen also applies the history-of-religions approach to biblical writings even in his *Rise*. The *Entmythologisierung* and even the *Entkerygmatisierung* of the Bible do not depend on a claim concerning the unreliability of biblical metanarratives. What unites these two approaches is the rejection of metaphysics. In this respect positivist materialism and radicalized phenomenology agree on certain essential premises of epistemology. Since Räsänen rejects metaphysics on the premises of immanent naturalism, he is simultaneously able to promote the crusade against metaphysics in other fields. This issue will be discussed in detail below when Räsänen's relation to phenomenology is investigated.<sup>27</sup>

It is also possible for the above-mentioned tension to find its parallel in literary theory. The postmodern does not really question the modern. Instead, it builds on it. The questioning of previous metanarratives is justified with a belief in better metanarratives. Scholars still have a strong belief in referential truth and new values are held to be more reasonable than the old ones. A search for new theology parallels the postmodern moralism that wishes to dismantle patriarchal domination in the Western world. The age of reason has turned into an age of revolution where, as Lyotard has stated, there is a constant battle over definitions of knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

In this respect Räsänen, despite originally being a historicist with a practical, positivist epistemology, has developed a poststructuralist hermeneutics. His ideas are analogous to those of Barthes and Lyotard who have preached against positivist metanarratives. Despite the seeming contradictions in certain epistemological questions, such a development is in fact consistent in the context of the European history of ideology. In order to justify progress and adopt new scientific knowledge, both in the area of philosophy and theology, it has been necessary for these writers to denounce universal meaning. In a sense, Räsänen writes in the footsteps

<sup>27</sup> The problem concerning metaphysics was treated above, in chapter 2.

<sup>28</sup> As Ward has noted, postmodernism does not abandon all the premises of the modern. Ward, *Modern Theologians*, 587: "Rather, postmodernism is a moment within modernism; the moment modernism pushes into the margins and represses in order to construct its circles of development, its linear progressions and its harmonies of part and whole."

of Derrida who wishes to question the *logos*, the “theological” meaning behind all language.

One essential theoretical problem both with Räisänen and the Derridean tradition is that they never really abandon truth-claims and the idea of universal meaning. They just relocate it to another place in their thought. All of these authors believe that their new theory as well as their explanations are both meaningful and trustworthy. This analysis for its part confirms the well-known claim that the postmodern does not really replace the modern. Instead, it builds on historicism and even positivism in many senses. This is the reason why some scholars prefer to call it late modern. Nevertheless, both Räisänen and postmodern philosophers are convinced that their findings are significant and that they can be properly communicated. And they believe that their views are worth accepting and adopting as guiding principles for both philosophy and theology. This raises questions concerning metalanguage, and we must now discuss this problem.

#### 4.2. *Paul de Man and the Problem of Metalanguage*

Since the aim of the present investigation is to locate Räisänen’s hermeneutics in relevant contexts that can enlighten his thinking, in the post-structuralist tradition there is one particular detail that provides new ideas for the history of interpretation. In the United States the Yalean structuralist Paul de Man developed Derrida’s philosophy in the area of literary theory. He is a follower of Nietzsche, as were most poststructuralists in Europe, but de Man does not focus on issues such as slave morality. He does reject metaphysics, but his main interest lies in rhetoric.<sup>29</sup>

According to de Man, Nietzsche was the key person to bring tropology back to philosophy and epistemology. Referring to Nietzsche’s lectures on rhetoric in Basel, de Man assumed that his philosophy in general was based on tropology.<sup>30</sup> In his interpretation of Nietzsche de Man states that he did not treat tropes merely as tools for eloquent speech. Instead, according to Nietzsche, many tropes such as metaphor, metonym, and

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<sup>29</sup> On the criticism of metaphysics, see de Man, *Resistance to Theory*, 14f. Many scholars, de Man included, are rather more interested in “Nietzsche the philologist” than in “Nietzsche the existential nihilist.” See *ibid.*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Paul de Man admits that rhetoric is not at the core of Nietzsche’s thinking, but he chooses to build his interpretation on tropes, see *Allegories of Reading*, 104. Nietzsche’s lectures were not very original but mostly followed Volkmann’s and Gerber’s previous ideas.

synecdoche, are typical of language itself. Tropes reveal the basic nature of language. Nietzsche proclaims that language itself is a product of rhetorical strategies and tools.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, de Man links Nietzsche's ideas on rhetoric with his criticism against metaphysics. He ignores the young Nietzsche's dependence on German idealism and its linguistic theory even though he himself sees that such a connection exists. Instead, de Man emphasizes philosophy and claims that tropes justify Nietzsche's view of language in general. Tropes create an illusion of reality. Language remains on a metaphorical level. Therefore in de Man's interpretation, Nietzsche claims that language cannot reflect the world outside language or any invisible reality. As Nietzsche used the rhetorical argument further to propose the relativity of truth, truth being just "an army of metaphors," de Man supposed that he had sufficient reasons to believe that the linguistic trend was growing out of Nietzsche's premises.<sup>32</sup>

The theory of an autonomic linguistic system is thus a Nietzschean phenomenon, if we are to believe de Man. A language governed by tropes dissimulates when it claims to reveal truth. According to de Man rhetorical instruments displace reality with foreign elements:

And it turns out that the very process of deconstruction, as it functions in this text, is one more such reversal that repeats the selfsame rhetorical structure. All rhetorical structures, whether we call them metaphor, metonymy, chiasmus, metalepsis, hypallagus, or whatever, are based on substitutive reversals, and it seems unlikely that one more such reversal over and above the ones that have already taken place would suffice to restore things to their proper order.<sup>33</sup>

This is how de Man himself created his theory of the allegory of reading. Readings are confronted with the world of tropes. Therefore the point of departure for linguistic deconstruction is "the figurality of all language."<sup>34</sup> Tropes represent everything that the language itself is. This is why de Man's textual hermeneutics focus on the explication of allegory.

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<sup>31</sup> De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 105. See both the introduction and Nietzsche's own text in Gilman, Blair and Parent, *Rhetoric and Language*, x; 65–70.

<sup>32</sup> De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 110. Zima notes that de Man mired in ambiguity since his view on reality and truth is scattered. Tropes according to de Man are not true or false as such but can be both simultaneously. Zima, *Deconstruction*, 95.

<sup>33</sup> De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 113; de Man's definition sounds too poststructuralist to represent Nietzsche's ideology in detail.

<sup>34</sup> De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 111.

Since linguistic expression dissimulates, deconstruction is needed for revealing the truth.

Derrida enters the picture here because, according to de Man, the idea of deconstruction connects Derrida to Nietzsche. The allegory of reading means that signs reproducing signs is based on the process of *différance*. Deconstruction started with Nietzsche's rhetorical philosophy and tropology and developed later into Derrida's idea of dissolving textual hierarchies. Therefore, de Man investigates hierarchic opposites and dissolves polarities. He accepts the Derridean principle according to which critique must reveal anything hidden in binary oppositions.<sup>35</sup>

For de Man, deconstruction is a practical analytical method. This is something that Derrida himself disliked. Derrida thought that deconstruction should be directed at a linguistic system, so he presented detailed analyses of particular examples, for instance of the word *pharmakon*. Later de Man applies the idea of deconstruction to dissolving ideological structures and values. It is possible that his interest in Nietzsche and his ideological criticism inspired him to make this change. In this process, Nietzsche becomes a deconstructionist in his eyes as well.

There is a persistent problem, though, that emerges from the premises of de Man's approach. While Nietzsche's philosophy deconstructs the mysticism created by literary rhetoric, it itself remains a literary product and rhetorical text. It is not easy to present deconstruction while depending on the figurality of language because any criticism must be written down. In every case the deconstruction appears to be as dissimulating and deceptive as the objects it wishes to criticize. What should one say about philosophy in such a case? Is it still literary tropology that is unable to attain any of its objects?<sup>36</sup>

The answer is as clear as it is alarming. For de Man there is no metalanguage. He follows Derrida who admitted that it is not possible to step outside the boundaries of the language system. This is why de Man leaves the final question about the truth of deconstruction open. Since philosophy is reduced to language, it cannot escape the circle it creates. "Philosophy turns out to be an endless reflection on its own destruction at the hands

<sup>35</sup> De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 115; *Resistance to Theory*, 24f.

<sup>36</sup> De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 113. Zima speaks of de Man's Nietzschean exaggeration. He claims that the deconstructionists tend to belittle the demand that all theoretical statements should follow the rules of formal logic. The tension between deconstructionist authors' theory and their own texts is obvious. Zima, *Deconstruction*, 88.

of literature.”<sup>37</sup> All texts, including de Man’s own, remain inside this endless reflection because they cannot resist the deception of rhetoric.

But all this is mere theory. In practice de Man’s deconstructionism is not that ambiguous, and neither was Derrida’s. In his book and in constructing a theory he follows common rules of logic. His writings are quite analytical and he presents detailed assessments of other scholar’s views. In fact he often follows the romantic tradition. Therefore, his literary criticism remains quite practical despite his difficult theory.<sup>38</sup>

In the Yalean tradition de Man appears as the key figure developing deconstructionism. By combining Nietzsche with Derrida he creates a new tropology that ends up in relativism where figures of speech govern questions about truth. Even though deconstruction itself is reduced merely to a theoretical principle de Man cannot escape the final paradox: the dissimulation of objects becomes the dissimulation of deconstruction.

Räisänen, apparently, does not believe in the figurality of *all* language, even though his view is close to that of de Man. Räisänen’s approach is not basically rhetorical. Despite this, for Räisänen, theological statements are mere figures. He is convinced that it is impossible to step outside the limits of language. Räisänen holds that theological formulations are mere discursive formations, as Foucault and the poststructuralist tradition maintained. His chain of interpretations is a chain of theological figures that dissimulate the psychological experience they attempt to represent.

This kind of view is apparent already in his early article on the authority of the Bible. According to Räisänen, words represent only the mental world of the speaker. Every religious writer conducts his discourse in a certain historical context. This context does not, however, dictate his views, even though it affects them in many ways. The primary ground for theological statements, for Räisänen, is always religious imagery, “the figurality of theological language,” so to say. There is no substance in theological concepts.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, Räisänen’s hermeneutics resemble that of the poststructuralists but in his epistemology he remains an empiricist. So, there are analogies, even though they do not explain everything. The problem of

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<sup>37</sup> De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 115.

<sup>38</sup> So Zima, *Deconstruction*, 107.

<sup>39</sup> Here again it is worth noting that, for Räisänen, such views concern theological language, not language as a whole. In this respect one cannot find a complete agreement between these two interpretations.



metalanguage appears now in a new light. Räsänen could easily accept a theological rendering of de Man's statement above. Also according to Räsänen, theology turns out to be an "endless reflection on its own destruction" in the hands of history. But if there is no metalanguage, what happens to endless interpretations, to the important chain?

Räsänen faces the basic problem that has troubled quite a few phenomenologists. Many scholars have tried to divide language in order to escape the problem of metalanguage. Heidegger kept searching for an authentic language that could help him speak about Being itself. Derrida made a distinction between indicative language and expressive language in order to reach beyond the prison of the system. Räsänen does not follow these attempts but bases his solution on his own previous convictions. For him, scientific language is exact and informative. Only theological language drifts into problems. For Räsänen, thus, the problem of metalanguage is identified with rejection of metaphysics. In this respect he is close to de Man.

In this scheme religious language, as well as biblical language especially for Räsänen as a New Testament scholar, is destined to be non-referential. It cannot reach any transcendental objects. In a sense this leads to a profanation of religion. Theology, for Räsänen, is a process of secularization. Religion is a sociological phenomenon. This is evidently also the reason why he finds his most preferable dialogue partners from the field of sociology. The sociology of knowledge is the theory that later becomes the most important legitimation for his hermeneutical theory despite the fact that he had developed the basic model of interpretation without it. Furthermore, such influential premises reveal certain interesting parallels between Räsänen's thinking and the deconstructionist claims speculating on the death of God.

#### 4.3. *From Deconstruction to Death-of-God Theology*

If the heavens remain silent and God is unreachable, what should a Christian theologian do? Räsänen has by no means been the only scholar in the West to speculate on the ruins of Christian dogmatics after the age of reason. For some scholars the main problem was just materialism with its overwhelming world view. Others, as we saw, started to speak about the death of the sign. Theology remains silent because our language cannot speak of God—or of any metaphysical issue for that matter.

Postmodern atheism and the paradoxical "atheist theology" are dependent on the death-of-God ideology. Their roots go all the way back to



Nietzsche who is the great protagonist for poststructuralists as well. Räsänen has not appeared as a representative of the death-of-God movement, but this does not mean that his thinking has been unaffected by that influential tradition. A survey of the main representatives of this ideology will help us assess Räsänen's views on this matter.

Postmodern discussion on meaning has repeatedly exploited religious terminology even in the area of philosophy. As we saw, the idea of permanent linguistic meaning, the *logos*, was identified as a "divine" eternal truth which was based on a concept of a structured world created by the Judeo-Christian God. If the age of the sign is "essentially theological," as Derrida put it, the concept of God cannot be left untouched.<sup>40</sup> Many scholars learned from him, but the road to the final conclusions was long and winding.

In theology, there is a parallel movement especially in the United Kingdom. After the Second World War bishop John A.T. Robinson wrote his *Honest to God*, a pamphlet in which he introduced death-of-God theology to the Church. Robinson was not yet a poststructuralist, as many of his followers were later, but he was a Nietzschean by conviction. Robinson contested the idea that God is a person. He opposed theologians according to whom "the language of transcendence" meant God is a personal being, wholly other to human beings, dwelling in majesty. "It is precisely the identification of Christianity—and transcendence—with this conception of theism that I believe we must be prepared to question."<sup>41</sup>

It makes sense then that Nietzsche enters the picture precisely in connection to this. For Robinson, Nietzsche was an exemplary critic of theism.

But, earlier, men like Feuerbach and Nietzsche, whom Proudhon correctly described as "antitheists" rather than atheists, saw such a supreme person in heaven as the great enemy of man's coming of age. This was the God they must "kill" if man was not to continue dispossessed and kept in strings. Few Christians have been able to understand the vehemence of their

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<sup>40</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 14. See also: "The difference between signified and signifier belongs in a profound and implicit way to the totality of the great epoch covered by the history of metaphysics, and in a more explicit and more systematically articulated way to the narrower epoch of Christian creationism and infinitism when these appropriate the resources of Greek conceptuality." *Of Grammatology*, 13. Actually *logos* as a term for divine wisdom belongs to Greek religion, not to Christian tradition.

<sup>41</sup> Robinson, *Honest to God*, 40–41.

revolt because for them he has not been the tyrant they portrayed, who impoverishes, enslaves and annihilates man.<sup>42</sup>

There are several conclusions to be drawn, and Robinson does so without hesitation: the precepts of the Old Testament Tyrant must be abandoned. Biblical sacrificial religion must be rejected. Robinson treats biblical texts in fact with a postmodern sensibility, even though his theory does not yet match that program. He attempts to dismantle Christian doctrines and overturn hierarchies. The concept of God is deconstructed, and Christian views are turned inside out. Christian caring and responsibility become enslavement and annihilation. Such views predate deconstructionist theology in an interesting way.

Apart from Robinson's theories, the nihilist rendering of the New Testament has found more straightforward expressions elsewhere. In the United States Thomas J.J. Altizer developed the death-of-God theology in a radical direction. "Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God shattered the transcendence of Being." According to Altizer, Christian thinking was to be directed by solely Nietzsche's guidelines. "Nietzsche was, of course, a prophetic thinker, which means that his thought reflected the deepest reality of his time, and of our time as well; for to exist in our time is to exist in what Sartre calls a 'hole in Being,' a 'hole' created by the death of God."<sup>43</sup>

Section 18 of Nietzsche's *Antichrist* contains many of the famous quotations that recur in ideological texts. Altizer uses it in the beginning of his *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* and joins Nietzsche in stating that God represents the contradiction of life itself. Being a God means, for Nietzsche, enmity against both nature and the will to live.

The Christian conception of God—God as god of the sick, God as a spider, God as spirit—is one of the most corrupt conceptions of the divine ever attained on earth. It may even represent the low-water mark in the descending development of divine types. God degenerated into the *contradiction* of life, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yes! God as the declaration of war against life, against nature, against the will to live!<sup>44</sup>

New theology sees things from the nihilist point of view. Only the death of God can liberate humanity from the oppression to which Christianity has subjected the humankind. The basis for this is, according to Altizer,

<sup>42</sup> Robinson, *Honest to God*, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Altizer, *The Death of God*, 98; cf. *The Gospel*, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Section 18 in the *Antichrist*, cited this time in Altizer, *The Gospel*, 21–22.

especially in the critique against metaphysics that has changed the thinking of the Western world. "No longer is there a metaphysical hierarchy or order which can give meaning or value to existing beings (*Seiendes*); as Heidegger points out, now there is no *Sein* of *Seiendes*."<sup>45</sup>

Nietzsche also gave Altizer the dialectics of negation. Following the ideas of *Zarathustra* Altizer cherished death and new birth.<sup>46</sup> "Only when God is dead can Being begin in every Now. Eternal Recurrence is neither a cosmology nor a metaphysical idea: it is Nietzsche's symbol of the deepest affirmation of existence."<sup>47</sup> Like Robinson, Altizer belongs to the time between the modern and the postmodern. The basic thoughts are inspired by *Entmythologisierung*. There is no need to justify the death of God. It can be postulated: "Furthermore, we shall simply assume the truth of Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, a truth which has thus far been ignored or set aside by contemporary theology."<sup>48</sup>

There is, however, another point of view. Later Altizer reads Nietzsche and Hegel through Heidegger's existentialism. In the new phenomenology, metaphysics has lost its traditional substance. This is where Altizer is close to Räsänen. He leans more on Heidegger though. Altizer looks for Being (*Sein*), not material beings (*Seienden*). For him there is no *Sein* of *Seiendes*.<sup>49</sup> Altizer's existentialism leads finally to emptiness that itself is a result of the original *self-annihilation of God*.

Rather, an authentic language speaking about the death of God must inevitably be speaking about the death of God himself. The radical Christian proclaims that God has actually died in Christ, that this death is both a historical and a cosmic event, and, as such, it is a final and irrevocable event, which cannot be reversed by a subsequent religious or cosmic movement.<sup>50</sup>

For Altizer, Zarathustra is a radical Christian image of Jesus. The biblical Jesus, the Jesus of the narrative, was but an ecclesiastical, seductive rendering of the Messianic figure. He had a message that negated the world. The radical Christian Jesus as Zarathustra, however, seeks for affirmation in the spirit of Nietzsche's *Antichrist*. Furthermore, for Altizer, this figure was the original Jesus whose image had been distorted in the course of early Christian history.

<sup>45</sup> Altizer, *The Death of God*, 98.

<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche, see especially the end of the *Twilight of the Idols*, 121.

<sup>47</sup> Altizer, *The Death of God*, 99.

<sup>48</sup> Altizer, *The Death of God*, 95.

<sup>49</sup> This may even contradict Heidegger who would not have expressed the criticism of metaphysics in that form, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 41–45.

<sup>50</sup> Altizer, *The Gospel*, 103.

Why in any way associate Zarathustra with Jesus? We do so first because Nietzsche himself opposed Zarathustra to Christianity, but more deeply because his portrait of Jesus in the Antichrist bears an amazing resemblance to Zarathustra, since the original Jesus, like the new Zarathustra, is here conceived to be the opposite of the Christian Christ.<sup>51</sup>

Already the attitude of young Altizer towards traditional Christianity resembles that of postmodern atheism. "Once we recognize that radical Christianity is inseparable from an attack upon God, then we should be prepared to face the possibility that even Nietzsche was a radical Christian."<sup>52</sup> This approach was developed much farther when Altizer adopted the so-called "American" version of Derrida's deconstruction.

In the collection *Deconstruction and Theology*, where the postmodern theories of Yale were applied to theology, the representative slogan was taken from Derrida's *Of Grammatology*: "The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth. The age of the sign is essentially theological."<sup>53</sup> If one is to assume that the justification of the "transcendental signified" (the *logos*) had depended on a Christian concept of God, the concept of God, said the deconstructionist theologians, was inevitably dependent on a sign.<sup>54</sup>

In his own article Altizer combined Derrida's thought with his previous death-of-God theology. According to Altizer, Derrida had simply developed the critique of Nietzsche and Hegel against the idea of presence. In this tradition of decentering—meanings as well as doctrines—Derridean *différance* had the very same purpose as the theology of reversal that preceded him.<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, Derrida's Hegelian conception of logos or presence is at once a conception of a totally incarnate Word and a universal or catholic word which is the ultimate source and ground of all actual meaning and identity. So it is that it is against this very background and foreground of the totality and universality of presence or logos that Derrida establishes his impossible project of recovering that "trace" which is sublimated and erased in pure and total presence. True, this project is made possible by the end of history or the death of God, but it remains an impossible project, and is so because of the total and ineradicable effects of the very actualization of a total presence.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Altizer, *The Gospel*, 60.

<sup>52</sup> Altizer, *The Gospel*, 25.

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 14.

<sup>54</sup> See the introduction in *Deconstruction and Theology*, viii.

<sup>55</sup> Altizer, *Deconstruction and Theology*, 148.

<sup>56</sup> Altizer, *Deconstruction and Theology*, 154.

With the help of Derrida Altizer constructed his somewhat paradoxical theology of absence, where the idea of the death of God was paralleled with the movement of *différance*. In the same manner as the “trace” (a Derridean term) conceals its origin, a consciousness about God defers actual divinity beyond the horizon of the observer. A sign corrupts the trace because it replaces it with a conventional unit of a sign system. Similarly, says Altizer, the speech about God replaces the original trace of divinity in theology.<sup>57</sup>

Derrida is the one in our time who has most fully recovered or restored the purely iconoclastic identity of the Book, and therewith the purely aniconic identity of pure writing or trace. That trace is the concealment of the origin, a concealment which is the unnameable movement of *difference-itself*, which Derrida strategically “nicknames” *différance*, and which can be called writing only within the *historical* closure of absolute knowledge. So it is that it is the death of God which makes possible the return of *difference-itself*, a pure difference which is lost with the advent of history or consciousness, and a difference or *différance* which is the true “other” of God.<sup>58</sup>

Deconstructionist theology builds on poststructuralism’s normative premises. Its main predecessor is Derrida whose crusade against the transcendental signified is believed to have changed the premises of theological construction altogether. Räisänen does not directly belong to this tradition but there are several analogies between his writings and deconstructionist theology. They emerge from a similar background and attempt to answer similar questions. Traits of a closer affinity can be found as the nature of religious language is discussed in more detail.

#### 4.4. *Principles of an a/Theology*

Many of the death-of-God theologians in the next generation were under the influence of Derrida. For instance, in the United Kingdom, Don Cupitt combines Robinson’s tradition of Anglican liberalism with Derridean deconstructionism. Cupitt’s affiliation to Nietzsche is evident in several

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<sup>57</sup> The “trace” is an intuition of reality, an illusion of a representation which reality produces in the mind. According to Derridean phenomenology it is not yet a sign. The trace produces a sign. But because the sign is already an arbitrary unit of a semiotic system, its meaning has to be something other than the object itself.

<sup>58</sup> Altizer, *Deconstruction and Theology*, 155. Cf. Ward: “Derrida’s work provided these death-of-God theologians with an anti-metaphysical account of language. Language pointed to itself, not to any realms or personages, revelations or hierarchies above, beyond or outside the secular world it constructed.” Ward, *Cambridge Companion*, 77–78.

passages. In the footsteps of the nihilist, Cupitt states that churches are sepulchers of God.<sup>59</sup> Continuing in Nietzsche's footsteps, Cupitt believes that Christianity is a religion of slave morality. New theology can be constructed only after the oppressive religion has first been subverted.

The notion that religious ethics is a "slave-morality" was greatly elaborated by Nietzsche in numerous books. [...] he gave a kind of psychological explanation of how a slave-morality was foisted upon the ancient world by the guile of early Christian apologists.<sup>60</sup>

Slave morality is promoted in the Church through its "*Master-servant imagery*." Cupitt implies thus that there is a profound problem in Christian faith because it proclaims a Jewish concept of God. The biblical Yahweh makes his people submit to his law. "Unhappily, no way has yet been found for a religion substantially to break with its past or modify its basic imagery."<sup>61</sup> This is why Nietzsche's critique against Christian tradition has been correct. "So far as we can tell, there is no objective personal God. The old language is still used, but the modern believer should use it expressively rather than descriptively."<sup>62</sup>

Even more than his early colleagues, Cupitt attempts to save the Church from nihilism, though. He is convinced that the Nietzschean master morality, understood properly, does not lead to tyranny. Rather, it aims—somewhat paradoxically—at altruistic love for one's neighbor. For him, once again, nihilism is but a version of liberal Protestantism.

This is surely indistinguishable from Nietzsche's own much-misunderstood master morality. The true master is the one who does not need a slave. The will-to-power is not struggle, and not competitive. It is a will to discriminate, to differentiate qualities and to create meaning... Jesus similarly distances himself from the reactive, at least in many of the texts attributed to him. He says, "Judge not, that ye be not judged": that is, precisely do not measure

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<sup>59</sup> Cupitt, *After God*, 73, 87.

<sup>60</sup> Cupitt, *Crisis of Moral Authority*, 115.

<sup>61</sup> Cupitt, *Crisis of Moral Authority*, 120. Räisänen speaks about the immoral nature of the Christian faith particularly in relation to the concepts of divine judgment and hell. He believes that the idea that God will punish people is excessive and based on retaliation. Räisänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 36; see also *Vartija* 5/6 (2004) 186. This inevitably concerns his concept of the biblical God, as well as the idea of Christ's death as redemption and expiation, even though he says the latter only indirectly in his writings.

<sup>62</sup> Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, 101; cf. 90–92. "For us God is no longer a distinct person over against us who authoritatively and by his *ipse dixit* imposes the religious demand upon us." Amnell has remarked, referring to Cupitt, that the death of God means the end of metaphysics. Amnell, *Uskonto*, 59.

yourself against your neighbour, do not make comparisons, respect persons, be envious, plan anxiously, seek recompense or nurse grievances.<sup>63</sup>

According to Cupitt, the postmodern analysis of meaning and its concept of the nature of knowledge is correct. The creation of moral values must in principle follow the new laws of deconstruction. Decentering reaches both theology and the writers of theology: "the vacancy at the Centre of all things and the vacancy at the centre of the self coincide." Theologians walk in the very same darkness and nothingness as other writers. Theology too is a game of signs. There is no transcendental signified in the theological tradition.

It's all signs: the words of Jesus, the stories of him, the iconography, the rituals, the commentaries and the lives all add up to a river of signs. The church is the Christian tradition, which is a river of signs.<sup>64</sup>

In his writings Cupitt ends up with much the same conclusion as postmodern philosophers. He exploits biblical terminology when dissolving the hierarchies of the dogmatic content of theology. Language is a game of differences, and meanings escape the observer: "it is the absolute otherness and absence of God, which Christ knew on the cross, that destroys belief and makes creative faith possible."<sup>65</sup>

We must also attend to Mark C. Taylor who added certain new features to the death-of-God tradition. As a second generation death-of-God writer, Taylor makes a distinction between the earlier "modern" form of the death-of-God and the current postmodern version of nihilism. Modern tradition had its disadvantages, and Taylor wishes to avoid them in his a/theology.

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<sup>63</sup> Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, 80. One should probably remember that in his more recent books Cupitt no longer attempts to maintain the connection with Christian tradition.

<sup>64</sup> Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, 146. Amnell notes that, according to Cupitt, meaning is like a fountain from which water flows but does not move. This comes near to Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence. Amnell, *Uskonto*, 145.

<sup>65</sup> Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, 148. In his later writings Cupitt maintains the structuralist idea of binary opposition but connects it with a mystical belief of creation: "*Thus a cosmos cannot be created at all except by establishing unequal, asymmetrical binary contrasts.*" Cupitt, *Postmodern Theology*, 484; italics his. At this phase even the structure of language was seen to correspond to reality. "But, on the second view, inequality, asymmetry, and difference (or "*différance*") are inescapable features of any ordered world—as indeed they are of language itself."



While the modern form of the death of God comes to expression in humanistic atheism, the postmodern form points towards a posthumanistic a/theology. By denying God in the name of man, humanistic atheism inverts the Creator/creature relationship and transforms theology into anthropology. Posthumanistic a/theology, by contrast, maintains that this inversion, though it is necessary, does not go far enough. The humanistic atheist fails to realize that the death of God is at the same time the death of the self.<sup>66</sup>

The first phase of nihilist theology, says Taylor, ended up in revolutionary radicalism. But a mere reversal of polarities is insufficient. It would not be satisfactory, for instance, just to return to a humanistic morality as Cupitt does. This would only replace one logocentric system with another one.<sup>67</sup> In spite of this deconstructionist statement, Taylor recognizes the same ethical problems which the French poststructuralist tradition had struggled with. He treats the themes of power and wealth. The condemnation of imperialism and colonialization has been compulsory. Western culture has been dominated by a phallocentric sexuality which can best be described as patriarchy. The death-of-God theology as such does not, however, dissolve patriarchalism. "The death of the Father God does not, of course, end the regime of patriarchy. The humanistic inversion of divinity and humanity leads to a worldly representative of the omnipotent Father." Modern humanistic atheism is as yet unable to carry out the program of deconstruction.<sup>68</sup>

Taylor has read his structuralists. He applies binary opposition in his own analyses and deconstructs concepts. In spite of this, he attempts to find a new approach to the problems of meaning and life. He seeks after language without logos and words without permanent meaning. He constructs an identity without a center. An ideal deconstructionist is, for Taylor a nomad who has no origin nor purpose in his life. "By negating 'negative excentricity,' this affirmation of centerlessness opens the possibility of exorbitant erring."<sup>69</sup>

Taylor's ideas resemble those of Räsänen. The dialectics between meaning and morality remains speculative. On the one hand, Christian tradition can no longer provide the ground for the basic meaning of human life. On the other hand, for Räsänen too, the contemporary nomad must battle against the destructive powers of society. This may include erring,

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<sup>66</sup> Taylor, *Erring*, 20.

<sup>67</sup> Taylor, *Erring*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> Taylor, *Erring*, 28.

<sup>69</sup> Taylor, *Erring*, 156–157.



as the chain of interpretation is never perfect and can never lead to a permanent conclusion, but it must be done. Post-Christian, post-modern, post-dogmatic theologians discuss similar problems and end up with astonishingly similar results.

Taylor needs Nietzsche repeatedly. His Zarathustra is an everyman, an Anti-Christ who has a new concept of grace. Salvation in this postmodern world is in carnival and comedy. God is dead and human beings are open to ever changing meanings. A successive line of new interpretations is all he can suggest in the situation where meaning has died.

When becoming no longer needs to be validated by reference to past or future but can be valued at every moment, one has broken (with) the law. Such transgression does not breed guilt and sin. In this case, lawlessness proves to be inseparable from grace—grace that arrives only when God and self are dead and history is over. The lawless land of erring, which is forever beyond good and evil, is the liminal world of Dionysus, the Anti-Christ, who calls every wandering mark to carnival, comedy, and carnality.<sup>70</sup>

Messianism is implicated in the new program, and it applies new norms to the postmodern figure of Jesus. Taylor's ideal Messiah or Believer or Zarathustra is an *Übermensch*, Superman. His carnivalism "neither ends nor cures." In this a/theology, Dionysus, Anti-Christ and the Crucified are one and the same. So the theology of deconstruction means profanation. "The 'epidemic play of perversity' subverts the opposition between the sacred and profane." The new religion is beyond good and evil.<sup>71</sup>

Deconstructionist theology, then, in many senses means a destruction of theism in the form traditional Christianity has taught it. The Jesus-figure now becomes an erring nomad who has no special purpose in life. The Christian message is replaced by language games, discourses, which oscillate between carnival and comedy. It is no wonder that in certain postmodern Jesus-novels we meet a similar figure who is neither certain of his message nor of his calling.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Taylor, *Erring*, 157–158. Following Amnell, one could say that Taylor is one of the most radical of the postmodern theologians. He is one of the few who really attempt to write theology where there is no criterion and no "original" to which one can return. Amnell, *Uskonto*, 101.

<sup>71</sup> Taylor, *Erring*, 169. Taylor's carnivalism is parallel to Nietzsche's Dionysic "orgiasm," the overwhelming "feeling of life and power", which makes even pain affect one in a "refreshing" way. Cf. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 120–121.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Ward's analysis: "And so we move beyond the death of God which modernity announced, to a final forgetting of the transcendental altogether, to a state of godlessness so profound that nothing can be conceived behind the exchange of signs and the creation of symbolic structures." Ward, *Postmodern Theology*, xix.

Returning, after this lengthy survey, to the analysis of Räsänen's hermeneutics, it is easy to notice that there are several points of contact between his ideas and death-of-God theology. For him, God is probably not dead in a strict atheistic sense of the word, but this is something that other theologians avoid as well. Instead, it is the *knowledge* about God that has been taken from us. This is precisely what writers from Altizer to Wink have stated. The meaning of God or the divine has died. It's all signs, as Cupitt proclaimed. God-sign has no real meaning. For Räsänen, there are no theological signs or concepts that could attain transcendental truth. The river of signs turns into a chain of interpretation.

A theoretical difference remains, though. Räsänen does not turn into a complete phenomenologist even though he does have sympathy with certain theories in that tradition—especially that of the sociology of knowledge as we saw above. He prefers rationalist epistemology. Both Altizer and Cupitt finally end up as Derridean relativists but Räsänen never goes that way. Despite this difference, his theory of the chain of interpretation does have poststructuralist features. The reason for this is evidently in the epistemological dichotomy between history and interpretation. Since German scholars from the eighteenth century on made a distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, it is consistent enough for New Testament scholars to treat these two areas with two different methodologies. History can still be investigated “wie es eigentlich gewesen,” while theological ideas can be dealt with in the symbolic world or textual world of Christian tradition. Demythologization has become identified with de-conceptualization and even deconstruction—as it was in Altizer's theory.<sup>73</sup>

The rejection of revelation (especially in his article *Authority*) suggests that, for Räsänen, it is no longer possible to define any relevant concept of God. His view parallels that of Wink and Taylor. Theo/logy, even though one must now question the ‘theo’ in the term, is natural theology or natural religion in an epistemological sense. It is not natural theology in a historical sense, as Räsänen says, because these scholars no longer assume that any idea of creation should be adopted in theological inference. The nature of God as a divine being cannot be inferred on the basis of the nature that God created. Theology, however, is “natural” in the

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<sup>73</sup> Räsänen's indebtedness to Wrede proves that he never questions the validity of historical study or even demythologizing although he begins to investigate religion instead of theology. Räsänen, *Beyond*, 13–15.

sense that religion invests immanent phenomena with transcendental signification.<sup>74</sup>

Räisänen too appears to think that we are left with silence. His views resemble the convictions of Cupitt and others in that they all postulate divine absence. If any divinity is present in the reality of the Church or in the reality of a theological faculty, he or she or it is present only in his/her/its absence. Räisänen follows postmodern negative theology here as defined by Altizer: "While that presence can now only be actually known or experienced as absence, it is a full presence nonetheless, and is so if only by virtue of the fact that it is actually experienced and known."<sup>75</sup>

The hermeneutics of absence has its problems. For Altizer and Räisänen God both speaks and remains silent at the same time. These scholars know that they do not know. On the one hand, there are no propositions that could describe divinity. Signs cannot attain the transcendent. On the other hand practically all of these scholars keep to Christian terminology. They speak of grace and all good things traditionally proclaimed by the Church. Altizer, for instance, states: "Now grace is everywhere because it is nowhere, nowhere that is where it is only itself, or where it can be known and named as the grace of God."<sup>76</sup>

Cupitt takes this even further by completely returning to Christian discourse. In his *Mysticism After Modernity* (1998) he parallels deconstructive theology with the medieval Eckhart's mysticism and searches for theology beyond experience. For this poststructuralist version of apophatic mysticism, a departure from the Christian God leads to the true God:

[W]e must indeed take leave of any God who is describable in human language, because the true God, The Godhead (*deitas*), is *différance*, the non-word, non-concept, non-thing prior to language that makes all meaning possible. The Negative Theology/*Différance* God would then be universal, ineffable, transcendental condition of everything—but not itself "a being" at all.<sup>77</sup>

"God" is just a sign that escapes any attempt to define it. All a theologian has is Derridean *différance* that never stops at one meaning. God is some kind of principle or precondition but no Being. This view comes close

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<sup>74</sup> This was noted when investigating Räisänen's earlier writings, see Räisänen, *Taik* 77 (1972) 83. Here he states that "authority" in interpreting the Bible has been shifted "from the texts of the Bible to personal experience."

<sup>75</sup> Altizer, *Deconstruction and Theology*, 171.

<sup>76</sup> Altizer, *Deconstruction and Theology*, 174.

<sup>77</sup> Cupitt, *Mysticism After Modernity*, 96.

to being just anthropology, and in this sense Robinson's Bultmannian existentialism is transferred to Cupitt. Existentialist mysticism consists of human experience—a feature that we know well enough from Räsänen's hermeneutics.

So God is simply the Fountain (in my own terminology), the self-outpouring play of pure secondariness (or contingency, or "life") that continually produces me and my world from moment to moment.<sup>78</sup>

On an existential level the God-sign has content which it cannot have on a descriptive level. This is Bultmannian hermeneutics, but there is also a point of contact also between Cupitt and Räsänen. Räsänen approaches his version of poststructuralist mysticism in terms of a sociology of knowledge. He remains a Christian—and a Lutheran pastor as well—because he accepts his Christian background in a formal sense. "We can make sense of our tradition by moulding it in the light of our own experience and understanding so that it becomes constructive for our life and, through us, the lives of others." In this tradition, Jesus is the central symbol.

I believe that "Jesus Christ" is a central symbol for my tradition that represents and transmits essential values of tradition, values that serve life: love, hope, faith in life, sincerity, responsibility.<sup>79</sup>

This definition is written implying the existence of a symbolic universe. Jesus Christ is here only a symbol, not really a person. There is some kind of apophatic mysticism involved, however, since the author does not reject the source from which his tradition springs. Räsänen writes in accord with Cupitt, probably just substituting tradition for God. The main emphasis is on anthropology. What is essential is that which "continually produces me," as Cupitt said.

Furthermore, Räsänen concentrates on values. By speaking of love and responsibility he joins the Kantian tradition where the essence of Christian faith is morality. In the manner of Harnack, Räsänen sees Christ merely as a symbol for the highest values in life. Christ is no longer the object of faith but just an exemplary person who has affected history with his humane ethics.

Räsänen himself is convinced that these views do not lead to unbelief or apostasy, though. This is the fact that actually makes him a mystic.

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<sup>78</sup> Cupitt, *Mysticism After Modernity*, 99.

<sup>79</sup> Räsänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 50.

Something in me makes it impossible for me to turn to unbelief. It is not a matter of my own choice. It depends on the fact that I cannot get rid of, and I do not want to get rid of, something in which I have become rooted. Boldly I believe that our Christian tradition contains creative and recovering powers that heal. [...] I believe even though it be absurd.<sup>80</sup>

Räisänen is not a biblical mystic though. Like Altizer and Raschke before him, Räisänen's insight culminates in apophatic hermeneutics. His God does not speak. He probably does not even act very much but, nevertheless, Räisänen is unable to leave the Christian tradition completely. This is why he adopts the terminology generated in the death-of-God movement. For him God is absent and silent. What is left are creative powers and inner healing, even though these ideals remain issues that need not be defined in detail.

In summary, one can say that there are several points of contact between Räisänen and the death-of-God movement. Räisänen does not speak openly about the death of God in a Nietzschean sense and, therefore, he cannot be considered a proper member of the movement. He appears to be convinced, however, that it is impossible for human beings to be in contact with a personal God. If there is a God, he is present only in his absence. There is a Christian tradition that possesses a general knowledge of the divine, but all one can really know in terms of proper knowledge is immanent. Religious language is only a collection of metaphorical symbols that are imprisoned in earthly linguistic systems. Deism was wrong because it attempted to bring Divinity to earth and to break the ontological silence. Räisänen chooses to go in the opposite direction. He joins those poststructuralist mystics who turn theology into anthropology. Doctrines become meaningless and Christian faith becomes a vague system of values. One of the problems with this is that it is no longer easy to derive ethical values from the Bible or the Christian tradition in a post-structuralist era. Thus we need to ask, what happens to the only uniting factor that makes continuity with the Christian tradition meaningful?

#### 4.5. *Questioning the System of Psychological Terrorism*

For Cupitt and many other death-of-God theologians the Bible represents a slave morality. Nietzsche's influence is significant here. The new vision of a morality "beyond good and evil" has always been one of the main

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<sup>80</sup> Räisänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 132.

arguments for the whole movement. Räsänen himself does not openly connect the idea of slave morality with death-of-God theology but, nevertheless, he contests Christian ethical views similar to those challenged by Cupitt and his colleagues. In this respect Cupitt's post-Christian theology serves as the best possible example to which Räsänen's ethical hermeneutics can be compared.

Cupitt has been open in defining his poststructuralist ethics. He does not hide his views but goes directly to the heart of the matter, as Altizer did before him. The Western God, for Cupitt, is a patriarchal despot: "God is a male chauvinist."<sup>81</sup> Since the Bible is filled with oppressive power structures, a new language must be brought in. God must no longer be depicted as a Master or King, because this implies the idea of a servant or slave. "Master-servant imagery suggests that we still live in a universe in which petition is the ordinary fellow's best recourse."<sup>82</sup> The moral authority of the church, thus, is a matter of false doctrines. Cupitt wants to transform the concept of God in order to reform the teaching of the church. Too often this is searched for in terms of standard British naturalism.<sup>83</sup>

Later in his *The New Christian Ethics* (1988) Cupitt presents a postmodern version of Christian ethics. The fact that meanings must now be constructed and interpreted in a completely new situation leads to a severe contradiction with Christian tradition. New ethics, as Nietzsche had suggested earlier, must attempt to restore human dignity. "Our task, then, is to redeem people from the old masochistic "orthodox" Christianity by curing them of the sense of sin, restoring their self-esteem and vindicating Christian action."<sup>84</sup>

For Cupitt, Christian hierarchies are always present in the church and, therefore, Christian life is directed by power struggles. He opposes

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<sup>81</sup> Cupitt, *Crisis*, 53.

<sup>82</sup> Cupitt, *Crisis*, 120.

<sup>83</sup> Cupitt, *Crisis*, 29. "So I conclude that the traditional expression of Christianity in the form of a drama or cosmic redemption myth was probably a mistake. For it seems that no such story can be satisfactorily told. It is unfortunate that the story still pervades the liturgy and popular teaching of the churches at a time when theologians are turning away from it."

<sup>84</sup> Cupitt, *New Christian Ethics*, 20–23. There is an interesting resemblance between Cupitt and one of Räsänen's last Finnish writings. In a text where Räsänen discusses sin and atonement he also discusses the concept of God these concepts imply. He first admits that the idea of sacrificial death can be understood as "one attempt" to solve the problems that Jesus' death brought along, but it can also lead to dangerous ideology. What kind of father, Räsänen asks, wishes good for his children and, therefore, demands perfect love—despite the fact that as human beings they are incapable of observing his rules? Räsänen, *Rosoinen Raamattu*, 162.

“the whole grand system of psychological terrorism”, where people are oppressed under the ethical precepts of Christian tradition. This has only led to degeneracy and self-denial.<sup>85</sup>

After the death of God everything changes: “We begin to understand that through the differentiation of our language and our practices we create everything.” For Cupitt, this world of evolution is a world of constant creation. There is only one moral imperative left: “Create value!” Since the Bible has turned out to be immoral, and the biblical God supports psychological terrorism, the only true religion is the one Kant postulated—even though Cupitt does not say it aloud here: “Value is Grace!”<sup>86</sup>

Cupitt’s own ethics build on human action and response: “Say Yes to life now.” Like Nietzsche before him, Cupitt cherishes humanity. Morality is not about words. It is about experiencing life. Love, for instance is no superhuman idea but just a personal feeling that belongs to the mundane world.<sup>87</sup> This is why the “new Christian ethics,” as he says, must be based on action. “Everybody has a talent, everybody must be ambitious, everybody must make a contribution, everybody can create and everybody can be God in the sense of being an original, making the rules and creating values.”<sup>88</sup>

One could, of course, question Cupitt’s coherence in defining his new ethics. He faces all the problems poststructuralist philosophers have faced before him. How, for instance, can he know that his new standards will be better than those in the Bible? Where does he find values for his new “actions,” and how can he be certain that they do not lead to just another power struggle? There are no valid answers to these questions—at least postmodern philosophy and culture have not been able to provide them, and neither can Cupitt. Instead, he does what his predecessors have done: he returns to referential language and truth-values. For Cupitt, in the end, words are not merely signs that refer to other signs. They imply values: “But with words I don’t just take in meanings; I also take in values.”<sup>89</sup>

This is how Cupitt attempts to create a poststructuralist ethics. He strives after an unconditional revolution that is based on relativist meanings. “In order to bring back some creative freedom into the world post-structuralist philosophies develop theories of the disorderly anti-social

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<sup>85</sup> Cupitt, *New Christian Ethics*, 59.

<sup>86</sup> Cupitt, *New Christian Ethics*, 14.

<sup>87</sup> Cupitt, *New Christian Ethics*, 57–58.

<sup>88</sup> Cupitt, *New Christian Ethics*, 58.

<sup>89</sup> Cupitt, *New Christian Ethics*, 7.



sign, of meanings that won't stay still, and of transgression." Cupitt remains ambivalent and keeps repeating the claims that, even in the area of ethical definitions, meanings float. The final revolution is irrational.<sup>90</sup>

Poststructuralist ethics has never followed the exact path of traditional philosophical ethics. Certain personal values have been important here but the main issues of ethical discourse have changed essentially. During the twentieth century social ethics had still had an important role in both society and the Protestant church. Ethics was often understood through class struggle and discussions concerned means of production. In the new French revolution in 1960s, economics had little to do with the criticism towards patriarchal white power. The new left, represented by the likes of Derrida, Barthes and Kristeva, saw their opponent now as the old regime and the church. As Lyotard put it, this was a conflict over means of knowledge, definitions, language, narratives, and attitudes. Incredulity towards old metanarratives arose from the concerns of minorities.<sup>91</sup>

For Cupitt, like for Robinson before him, dogmatic Christianity represents an old metanarrative. In ethical discourse, the concept of sin should now be overturned. The heavenly "male chauvinist" must not be allowed to dictate the life-style of progressive people. This resulted in the complete reinterpretation of Christian ethics. Traditional doctrines that support a false understanding of humanity, namely hamartology, expiation, and reconciliation, must be rejected. Then traditional views of sexuality, family, and prudence must be replaced by a Dionysian freedom.

Räsänen is close to Cupitt in many respects. Even though his expressions and formulations do not always resemble those of Cupitt, he abandons similar issues for similar reasons. Räsänen, too, rejects doctrines such as the traditional view of sin. He holds that the idea of Jesus' sacrificial death is a mere myth. And he assumes that the very concept of doctrine implies a violent restriction of reality.

As regards the ethical conduct of life, Räsänen usually stays within the limits of a rather conservative line of thought. He mostly repeats the idealist values of liberal Protestantism: Christian tradition contains "critical and liberating powers." He summarizes them in words such as "truth,

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<sup>90</sup> Cupitt, *New Christian Ethics*, 8.

<sup>91</sup> Cupitt follows his continental protagonists in presenting a quite political alternative for a new ethical theology. "We are so close to the marxists because theology has become so very historical a subject, and because modern culture just is a lot more marxist than it (often) cares to admit." Cupitt, *New Christian Ethics*, 168. His faith here is not blind, though, because he simultaneously renounces the marxist idea of progress, as well as marxist optimism, in the name of poststructuralist thought.



freedom, love, and joy.”<sup>92</sup> Jesus, in turn, remains for him just a symbol of this tradition, which represents the essential values that serve life: “love, hope, faith in life, authenticity, and responsibility.”<sup>93</sup>

All this sounds very Kantian. Both Cupitt and Räisänen in some respect develop what Kant started. In Kantian phenomenology there is no language about God. God cannot be described by human words, and divine properties cannot be classified. Instead, God is a principle above all principles. There is only an experience of God, the universal *a priori* certainty that God is the highest Good who justifies pursuing a moral life. This is also why “historical religions” gradually vanish to be replaced by an ethical society. What for Weber was a cultural evolution concerning the growth of positivist knowledge was for Kant a moral evolution towards a perfect humanity.

Based on this chapter’s analysis we are entitled to ask whether post-structuralist ethics differs in any sense from the ethical interpretation of liberal Protestantism. Has Cupitt introduced any new arguments for Christian ethics, or is he just relying on a Neo-Kantian interpretation of religion? As regards the basic ontology behind the theory, Cupitt apparently builds on principles similar to those of Herrmann, Harnack, and their followers. For every one of them, God is nothing but a great metaphysical principle legitimating morals. God is even known by this *a priori* awareness of ethical values. Religion, for Cupitt, too, is about ethics. The good news is reduced to Kant’s categorical imperative. Cupitt also believes that modern faith must be freed from the burden of historical religions with their mythology. The only difference between the Kantians and Cupitt is probably that the former still assumed that the ethical ideals of the Bible were positive and that modern religion could learn from it. Cupitt represents postmodern values and claims that, at least partly and usually in the area of sexual ethics, the “old masochistic ‘orthodox’ Christianity” violates human dignity. The common problem with Cupitt’s bold statements on these issues is the lack of examples. He is not alone in this, though. In the manner of Nietzsche, scholars often use general statements in order to avoid direct claims against traditional Christian ethics that protects personal inviolability, bodily integrity, safe family life, possessions, and reputation. Violence, greed and infidelity seldom turn into good values in

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<sup>92</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 150.

<sup>93</sup> Räisänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 52.

any theory. In practice, poststructuralist ethics build mainly on the Bible just as Kant's ethics did.<sup>94</sup>

The basic claim behind the postmodern program, thus, was Nietzschean. This is why a similar ideology can be found also elsewhere, in different areas of Western culture. A crusade against Christian slave morality has been going on for decades. The new standard for the approach, naturally, can be found in the idealist formulations of European enlightened humanism. Ever since the arrogant attacks of the French revolution against the Christian church, individual freedom and moral independence have been the abstract ideas that have been contrasted with Christian tradition. Nietzsche had in fact little to contribute to this. He just provided efficient language and a new discourse. The classic problem of the philosophy of religion in this issue is that these new values remain on a highly abstract level and are hard to apply to practical subjects. The attack on the alleged slave morality continues, though. Signs of it can be seen throughout western culture, for instance in recent Jesus-novels where traditional biblical hierarchies are inverted.<sup>95</sup>

Nietzsche's own rebellion was somewhat irrational. For instance in his *Zarathustra* Nietzsche actually had recourse to the Christian conception of love and even ended up with an altruistic view of life. In a certain sense, the contradiction between *Sklavenmoral* and *Herrenmoral* is fictive, based on an imagined feeling that any speech about sin sounds restrictive to independent humanists and exposes religious power structures.<sup>96</sup> As noted above, it is difficult to find authors who would suggest violence or fraud as proper ethical mores. In contemporary culture we can find a similar discussion in the so-called new atheism. In the atheist discourse Nietzschean terminology is replete, of course, but the constructive answer seldom differs from Christian ethics. Only a few naturalists argue that violence may be good for the evolution of humankind in the long run. Other atheists soon silence these voices, though.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> As we have noted in this chapter, postmodern ethics is in practice something else. It usually comprises the "triad" of feminism, homosexuality, and post-colonialism. Old metanarratives were replaced by the smaller narratives of minorities (or the oppressed). Postmodern ethics aim to change the discourse concerning these minorities. Apart from these subjects it is not easy to find any other moral issue that would be commented on in the literature—or represented in the new methods of fine arts or sociology.

<sup>95</sup> These ideas and analogies derive from my analysis on Jesus-novels, see Eskola, *Evil Gods and Reckless Saviours*, 135–137, 259–261.

<sup>96</sup> See Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 10–14.

<sup>97</sup> For the discussion of recent atheists, see Beattie, *The New Atheists*, especially pp. 76ff. John Gray belongs to the few who support violent naturalism, Gray, *Straw Dogs*, 110ff.

The problem of poststructuralist ethics does not dissipate here, though. As long as authors rewrite the Nietzschean attack on slavish Christianity it is justified to ask how far they are ready to go. One is not allowed to forget that Nietzsche's original polarization resulted in "hard and frightening" values. He was ready to turn the knife despite the pain he caused—at least in his philosophical ponderings.<sup>98</sup> And many were to appear who followed his master morality, creating ideologies that we now consider the darkest of Western history. What is the ethical responsibility of postmodern writers in the present post-holocaust situation?<sup>99</sup>

Räisänen uses an ethical discourse similar to those of poststructuralist writers such as Cupitt. Traditional Christianity is basically a slavish religion, oppressing free men and women who strive for tolerance and goodwill. Such a Nietzschean criticism remains on a very general level, though, since in his constructive statements Räisänen, like Cupitt before him, subscribes to standard Christian ideals. For both of them the problem is with slavish orthodoxy, the oppressive dogmatism, which they sternly oppose. It is clothed in ethical discourse, though, and this brings a postmodern flavor to it.

#### 4.6. *Contribution to Contemporary Discussion IV*

It is to be expected that, in the age of structuralism, biblical scholarship would turn once again to language. Even philosophy in the twentieth century has mostly been philosophy of language, in both the analytical and continental traditions. The Anglo-American analytical current, growing from a German and Austrian background as well as different continental traditions including structuralist movements, have influenced essentially all philosophical and theological work during the last hundred years. There are several reasons for this, one of the most important no doubt being that Kant based his philosophy on the analysis of a simple sentence. Logic was later essential for logical empiricism (logical positivism), and this current in philosophy was interested mainly in the conditions of true

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Onfray, in his turn, speaks of the need for atheistic atheism that is no longer trapped in Christian concepts. Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto*, 214–219.

<sup>98</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, § 210.

<sup>99</sup> Their only solution appears to be to put God into a Manichean struggle with the Devil. For such a view on holocaust literature, see Pinnock, *Beyond Theodicy*, 135–138. We shall later see that Räisänen, too, tends to blame the biblical God for the horrors of history.

sentences. Heidegger turned to philosophy of language after first settling up with the Cartesian tradition in previous scholarship. And finally Derrida, with his colleagues, focused on an idea of a language system that dominates human interaction and dissimulates the information gained from the “real” world.<sup>100</sup>

In the philosophy of language in the twentieth century there is one exceptional feature, though, that needs to be taken into account. The concepts of language and meaning are not yet very developed. What is common to most of the above-mentioned approaches is the semantic principle of “primitive reference.” Linguistic signs have been understood simply as entities called words, and the meaning of a word was its object. This corresponds with the traditional nominalist view that governs the theories of logical empiricism, and it still influences Derrida’s Husserlian phenomenology. He is interested in the *noematic* structures of particular words, these words understood as signs of the system (and not the other way round: concepts understood as signs of the systems, apart from the signifiers themselves). Biblical scholars from Reimarus to Räsänen accept and apply the idea of primitive reference. For them, the only meaningful words and sentences are those that have a proper reference in the material world. As religious language is filled with other kind of words, their meaning must be reduced in one way or another to immanent language.<sup>101</sup>

After the linguistic turn, the entire understanding of language changed. This is not just a matter of a contrast between previous views and new approaches but, rather, a completely new field of investigation. Saussure developed semantics by making the famous distinction between the signifier and the signified. The sign vehicle was separated from the concept. After Saussure, the language system was no longer understood to be a system of words as mere acoustic images or written signifiers. Instead, the language system was depicted as a mental system of concepts (the *signifieds*) that refer when they are used in intentional sentences describing particular situations. Furthermore, there is no natural link between

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<sup>100</sup> This is also the reason why, methodologically, the linguistic turn has influenced most thought in the emerging and developing methods of comparative literature. Therefore, a general introduction like Selden-Widdowson-Brooker, *Literary Theory* will also teach much about the new approaches in biblical scholarship.

<sup>101</sup> I have emphasized the common background in semantics because it reveals that several hermeneutical theories are, in fact, based on principles that changed only through the long-term influence of the change in linguistic understanding.

the signifiers and the signified themselves but their connection must be considered arbitrary.<sup>102</sup>

After Saussure the understanding of linguistic truth and scientific truth changed. One could still speak of the truth of language or sentences, even theological sentences, but it was no longer a matter of world view or dependent on some kind of materialist reduction. And more importantly still, the *meaning* of a sentence could not be detected "behind" the semantic information of the utterance itself (as Bultmann thought) but it is directed by the linguistic structure of the text. Frei based his narrative analysis on this kind of principle. Later several scholars in different fields have developed their semantic analyses in this direction (Palmer, Saeed, Ricoeur).<sup>103</sup>

The history of research shows thus that the different currents in the structuralist tradition are not quite consistent in their treatment of language. Poststructuralism, for instance, apparently causes trouble for the new semantics. Firstly, Derrida did not apply the Saussurean concept of sign in his treatment of the *noema*. This resulted in an incoherent system where the signs of the linguistic system had no precise meaning and the relation between lexical meaning and *noematic* meaning was left undefined. Secondly, poststructuralists held simultaneously that an autonomic language system cannot refer to reality *and* claimed that linguistic structure reflects social structures. This had not only to do with early structuralism where social structures were seen *as* the basic linguistic and cultural structures (Lévi-Strauss). Similar views still prevailed in the phase where poststructuralists proclaimed the death of the transcendental signified.

This, no doubt, must be related to the death-of-God movement, which especially in its later phase absorbed much from French poststructuralists. Dissolution of meaning has been the reactive attitude of many of these who have struggled either with historicism or the modern. At the same time, and for a rather concordant reason, many writers have attacked the Christian metanarrative because God has been seen as the final justification for transcendental meaning or permanent truth. Therefore, it is only appropriate that radical immanence in hermeneutical theory has

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<sup>102</sup> For the terminology, see the original, Saussure, *Cours*, 25–31. The concept as such is not arbitrary, but the relation between the signifier and the signified is. In different languages "dog" may be replaced by "Hund" or "koira," but the concept remains the same. Your German or Finnish friend understands that we are speaking about his dog.

<sup>103</sup> I refer to different kinds of authors here. Linguists comprise writers such as Palmer, *Semantics*, 155–166; Saeed, *Semantics*, 23–31, 211, 284; and in philosophy I refer to Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 20–21; see also Ricoeur, *Metaphor*, 49.

resulted in apophatic theology, be it the death of God or “epiphanies of darkness.”

What is exceptional, probably, in these postmodern theologies is that they still attempt to maintain metaphysics in their approaches. If God is known only in his absence, there is a concept of a (totally) transcendent God present in the theory. This is also true for Cupitt’s almost romantic mysticism where the Divinity has an extraordinary status even though his God-character stays completely beyond meaning.

In this respect, one could say that Räisänen, adopting or at least commenting on several issues presented by poststructuralist theologians or the postmodern movement, has attempted to find an exit to the dead ends of contemporary theory. Räisänen evidently accepts the apophatic aim of the poststructuralist current. He does maintain many Christian concepts, and he never rejects the mysterious Divinity completely. Nevertheless, Räisänen obviously believes that neither the death-of-God writers nor the deconstructionists have actually succeeded in presenting a completely apophatic theology. The solution can be found only in the complete rejection of metaphysics. For Räisänen, only the immanent sociological explanation of the phenomenon of religion can explicate what religion is about.

Räisänen’s sociology of knowledge, discussed in the previous chapter, appears as the final hermeneutical solution for the problems that the turn in linguistics has brought to biblical interpretation. In fact, he seems to take one step back to support the approach of the earlier phase of the death-of-God movement. He appears to claim that metaphysics and divine things must be abandoned in interpretation theory because of the changed world view. In other words, the change is irreversible because of the Weberian metanarrative that has altered the very point of departure for hermeneutics.<sup>104</sup>

The normative element, present still both in Räisänen’s theology and in the writings of Cupitt and many other poststructuralist theologians, brings once again to the fore the ethical paradox that was discussed above. Postmodern theology has often taken the form of a moralist theory defending the rights of the marginalized. In the poststructuralist phase this attempt becomes even more implausible as it does in the context of sociological structuralism. If values are held to be only arbitrary instances of a system, no true value can be established. This probably does not concern Räisänen

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<sup>104</sup> See the analysis in subchapter 3.7.

as much as Cupitt and the postmodern theologians because Räisänen still believes in the dualistic model of true knowledge and fictitious religion. He would try to escape all accusations by referring to realist epistemology. Postmodern theology, however, cannot do so and drifts constantly into trouble with the dissolution of meaning.<sup>105</sup>

The linguistic shift creates other kinds of problems for Räisänen's theory. Does Räisänen follow Bultmann in assuming that the meaning of a biblical expression can be found behind the text itself? This is a complicated question. He has adopted some of Bultmann's premises but meaning, for him, appears to be dependent on his view of beliefs. When Jesus proclaims imminent parousia, Räisänen states that the meaning of his sentences are simple enough. Jesus means what he says. And as the apostolic church teaches that Jesus is a pre-existent figure, this is what they mean. Räisänen is not interested in playing with the theory of meaning. He prefers focusing on significance and acceptability. Since his world view prevents him from granting high Christology or standard soteriology significant roles, he assumes that there are no beliefs in the Christian community that should be considered normative.<sup>106</sup>

The new semantics sees the setting in quite another way. Linguistic analysis has shown that for all the play with the alleged autonomy of the language system, it has not really been able to distance itself from standard referential semantics. Theories have ended up in the situation that would be familiar to Räisänen: theological language is considered as a superstructure that reflects and even represents social categories. When this kind of model is assessed from a hermeneutical point of view the result is unavoidable: language functions in terms of referential truth. This statement has several important implications. The criticism of the ideological/theological content of the New Testament must now be seen

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<sup>105</sup> This has been noted for instance by literary critics. "Postmodernism works to show that all repairs are human constructs, but that, from that very fact, they derive their value as well as their limitation. All repairs are both comforting and illusory. Postmodernist interrogations of humanist certainties live within this kind of contradiction." Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 7. Similar criticism can be found in Eagleton, *Illusions*, 87–90; Amnell, *Uskonto*, 188.

<sup>106</sup> In a general sense Räisänen still believes that the basic message and actual "meaning" of religion lies behind the texts, in the reality which his method is able to detect and reconstruct apart from the investigated sources. This reality, however, is mainly a pluralist situation where normative ideas are only gradually abstracted during the course of history, and result in values such as love and truthfulness. In the end we find a normative situation, though. When Räisänen opposes violent orthodoxy, intolerant Christomonism, or the irrational doctrine of the Trinity, he brings up values that cannot be diluted into abstraction. For the last issue, see especially chapter 8 below.



as ideological criticism. It cannot depend merely on the idea that signs or symbols are unable to represent social reality but, instead, it depends on the rejection of the theological ideas themselves. For example, when Räsänen contests biblical Christomonism, he performs perfect ideological criticism.

Does Räsänen confront the problem of metalanguage, then? Apparently he does not. Räsänen still clings to the theory of primitive reference. He is convinced that theological language is mythical and has no reference whatsoever. In essence, all scientific language is metalanguage for him. It is as real as the historical language dealing with redactional layers or Christological currents.

What does this mean for theology itself? Räsänen's basic hermeneutics is quite close to the poststructuralist hermeneutics of negative theology. For Räsänen, too, God is present only in his absence. Immanent ontology does not allow for metaphysics. The chain of interpretation remains in the sphere of social communication. If there is propositional theology, it must be interpreted as mere ideology that has no metaphysical core and no absolute features. Even though Räsänen does not want to be a Deist, he never abandons Christianity, which values humane ethics. In this he agrees with Cupitt for whom "god" is a source of positive life energy. Cupitt states that, instead of following Altizer who proclaimed emancipation from the church, "I fear that I for one am fated to be one of the last ecclesiastical theologians rather than one of the first post-ecclesiastical theologians."<sup>107</sup> Räsänen could say the same, and he has actually made a similar statement in his own way. In a Finnish article he answers those who wonder why he has not left the Church. Against all expectations and even against his own good reasons as well, he chooses to stay because: "Something in me makes the decision of unbelief impossible for me [...] I do not want to get rid of something where I have my roots."<sup>108</sup>

In this respect, also Räsänen is "one of the last ecclesiastical theologians"—despite all the rational inconsistencies and paradoxes this may entail. He reinterprets an old slogan: "I believe, even though it would be absurd." And by referring to Bonhoeffer and Tillich (and some Finnish authors) he then continues with negative theology: "our life has a depth dimension, a mundane transcendence."<sup>109</sup> For Räsänen, God is

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<sup>107</sup> Cupitt, *A Long-legged Fly*, 7.

<sup>108</sup> Räsänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 132.

<sup>109</sup> Räsänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 133.



not present. He has no face and no name. He has no properties as human beings do. He does not speak or reveal himself. Despite all this, he may exist. Negative theology does not abandon the church completely.

One could say, therefore, that Räsänen in his hermeneutics is a post-structuralist proclaiming a negative theology. This definition, naturally, is not in agreement with his other commitments. But despite all the other epistemological premises and ontological views, Räsänen does represent apophatic theology as well. For him there is no real life outside the "God-sign." He is not a poststructuralist completely in a theoretical sense because he still believes in rationalist ontology. He also believes in the power of language. But in his negative theology he demands immanence. The attack upon metaphysics unites him with the poststructuralists. For him the prison of language is the prison of knowledge. There is no truth beyond the scientific understanding of existence. And this is usually the conviction of the poststructuralist movement. Today, such views must be questioned, though. Not all philosophers believe that language cannot reach beyond its own system. Of course it can. In fact, this is the only way to solve the principle problem of referential language: poststructuralist moralism aims at social renewal but, paradoxically, also believes that language cannot reach beyond the limit of metaphysics.

This analysis confirms the general picture that we have found in Räsänen's writings. His hermeneutical theory grows from the soil of the science of religion. He is not interested in the belief-systems found in the texts that he investigates. Instead, he assesses the phenomenon of religion. Räsänen classifies beliefs according to their alleged significance to modern human beings.<sup>110</sup> This analysis helps us also explain some of the particular features in Räsänen's theory. Räsänen apparently could provide a constructive treatment of the belief-systems found in different New Testament writings, should he choose to do so. His view of language does not make him separate meaning from the text in the same manner as Bultmann's view implies. Räsänen could well accept that Jesus' eschatology or Pauline treatment of Christocentric soteriology expresses the very meaning of the text. Why does he not do that then? Räsänen's science of religion approach makes him oppose eschatological beliefs and exclusivist

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<sup>110</sup> This is supported by Räsänen's interest in certain philosophy of religion issues that recur in science of religion, such as the problem of theodicy. In his hermeneutics Räsänen does not make any essential distinction between historical arguments and philosophy of religion arguments.

Christomonism. Ideological criticism prevails. This hermeneutical principle is so significant that we must return to it in the following chapters.

Linguistic shift has changed the hermeneutical discussion, though. As noted above, the questions of meaning and signification are now at the core of both semiotic and narratological theories. Interpretation of texts is seen as a matter of investigating signification processes. The new semantics is interested in the semantic structure of particular expressions, not in some reconstructed historical reduction behind the text. The standard claim has been that such interest in texts themselves is merely an attempt to bypass the historical problems the historical-critical investigation has brought under discussion. Many contemporary writers state, however, that the text itself should be the main object of investigation, and all historical observations should concern the text as it stands. This is why all theories about the construction or compilation of the text are dependent on the linguistic analysis of the text. As we saw in the chapter dealing with methodology above, this is the opposite of what scholars in the historical-critical movement maintained. We shall elaborate on these issues in the chapters to come.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RÄISÄNEN'S WOLFENBÜTTELIAN TURN: DISSOLVING THE OLD *SYSTEMA*

In the previous chapters we noted that, instead of focusing on changes in a particular religion, sociological hermeneutics pays attention to changes in the society and culture. The problem with this kind of approach is that the analysis no longer belongs to the sociology of religion as such, but provides a history of ideas interpretation of the Christian faith. Weberian hermeneutics treats the Bible by reading rationalist principles back into the texts and attempts to explain the genesis of ideas in terms of sociological processes. This aim is quite explicit in Räisänen's criticism and in his work Weberian sociology is completed by radical historicism. The revolutionary aspect of interpretation that was mentioned before, the "heretical imperative," has always made Räisänen relativize the significance of particular doctrines in the New Testament.

#### 5.1. *The Disillusionment of Eschatology*

Considering Räisänen's approach in *Religionsgeschichte*, comparative religion as it is called today, we must ask how he really conducted this study. If he is interested merely in particular texts and the particular early Christian groups behind them, should he not focus mainly on these distinct groups? Scholars in this discipline usually refer to the need for an empathic attitude in investigation: any religious belief system should be assessed on its own premises. It is the scholar's duty to remain neutral and attempt to understand religious groups from an insider's perspective, if possible. Räisänen goes beyond these ideals.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The reason why this chapter is placed only after the chapters dealing with sociology and structuralism, and not right behind the first chapter on Reimarus, is simply that this issue forms a bridge between Räisänen's historical studies and his theological writings. The aim of the present chapter is to show that Räisänen had already early on in his career abandoned most of the traditional dogmatical convictions of the Christian church. In many respects, then, his view on theology was completed already before the *Rise*, and even before his study on the premises of theology in the *Beyond*.

In this respect Räsänen remains Reimarus' pupil. He has inherited the rationalist attitude which assumes that scholars are able to assess even the very nature of religion itself. We have seen above how this kind of attitude permeates Räsänen's writings. He differs from Bultmann in that he no longer sees any connection between experience and kerygma. Therefore, he does not investigate or even postulate any sort of revelation. In Räsänen's immanent hermeneutics the focus is simply on human beings' different ways of describing their personal experiences. What one needs to ask here is, why should the assessment of such descriptions be normative? Why should one prioritize personal experiences? This leads us to what one could call Räsänen's Wolfenbüttelian turn in his phenomenological hermeneutics. It is not a shift that would take place in the middle of his career but rather a turn that made him a rationalist scholar from the beginning. It is something that has been typical of his writing all his adult life, and the startling hermeneutical statements in the later *Rise* only consolidate the views that he held over the years.

Returning to Reimarus means, in Räsänen's treatment of early Christianity, an attempt to dissolve the doctrinal tradition of Christianity completely. Just as Bultmann never moved beyond *Entmythologisierung*, Räsänen never developed his hermeneutics into phenomenology or structuralist textualism. Instead, he is convinced that a strict analysis of early Christian writings can produce a reduction that can better serve as a basis for modern faith and meet the religious needs of contemporary women and men. Already in the case of Weber, the sociological interpretation of religion was based on a quite rationalist history-of-religion view on Christianity. These two views support each other.

Also Räsänen builds his sociological hermeneutics on radical historicism, as we have seen above. Religion as such is an irrational form of culture. It is a compilation of countless contextual descriptions of human beings' inner feelings, a panorama of human thought. Therefore, especially during the first centuries, it also produced futile beliefs that enslaved capable thinkers and hindered the cultural development of thought. What is more dangerous, says Räsänen, is that religion often culminates in inhumane ethical views and precepts. Instead of personal freedom, religion in general and Christianity in particular can impose an oppressive system that is harmful for its followers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In his article on the relation between comparative religion and New Testament studies Räsänen remarks that there are two different approaches to texts and even religions.

This is why Räisänen also develops his sociological interpretation into a Reimarian project that wishes to destroy the old *Systema*. For Räisänen, the illusion of early Christian dogma has been only a system of beliefs compiled in the small group that gradually gained power in early congregations. When investigated in the light of New Testament writings, however, all such systems prove illusionary and coercive. Biblical scholarship's task, according to Räisänen, is to uncover the dogmatic ambitions both in the New Testament and its readings, and to disclose the contradictory aims of separate groups that have fought each other in the early Church.

The important detail in this issue is that this effort is not simply a part of Räisänen's history-of-religion project started after the publication of his book *Beyond New Testament theology*. Instead, it is a life-long enterprise and examples of such assessments can be found throughout his writings. Räisänen wrote against certain Christian doctrines in the beginning of the 1970s, and he has often returned to such issues in his Finnish articles. Therefore, it is important to investigate the contexts in which these ideas occur and the kind of theological thinking they represent. These views become essential later when the methodology and purpose of *The Rise of Christian Beliefs* will be investigated.

First example of the defective *Systema*, for Räisänen, is eschatology or—to be precise—the early Christian expectation of Jesus' return, the *parousia*. According to the apostles, and evidently even Jesus himself, Jesus should have returned during the lifetime of the first generation after Easter. This issue is important for Räisänen for two reasons. Firstly, he is convinced that the eschatological interpretation of the historical Jesus' proclamation is correct. He often refers to Weiss and Schweitzer who claimed that this is the main theme in Jesus' message. In this respect Räisänen clearly differs from Reimarus and Strauss, as well as from Bultmann and many of his followers. Secondly, for Räisänen, the disillusionment of eschatology is the main grounds for stating that early theology has no relevance for later generations. If Jesus' own message was never fulfilled, why should anyone cling to some irrelevant mythological doctrines his followers created after his death?

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"Transcendentalists" attempt to find the final core of all religions. "Empirists," in turn, state that there is no such thing as "religion" for a historian. There are but *religions*. A particular religion is an "abstraction of metaphysics or theology." Räisänen, *TAik* 2 (1997) 120. Räisänen himself, naturally, belongs to the latter group. Main parts of this text can be found in Räisänen, *Challenges*, 209–225; see especially 210–211.

For instance, in *Authority* Räisänen states that the New Testament idea of eschatology is unfamiliar to modern human beings. People today no longer assume that world history would have an end after which God would take all humanity into his heavenly court of justice. Jesus did proclaim the imminent end of the world but he never returned.

Both the apocalyptic nature of Jesus' proclamation of "God's kingdom" and the fact that the parousia never occurred are issues that should nowadays be taken seriously.<sup>3</sup>

This is the issue to which Räisänen returns in several writings. For instance in the paper he read at the Finnish Society for Parapsychological Research, discussed in detail above in chapter 2, Räisänen concludes his speech by reminding his readers that, apart from the parapsychological horizon he has taken in the lecture, the Easter experience of the first Christians has become problematic because history was never finished according to the Christian "screenplay." And he writes: "What happened to Jesus, never meant the beginning of the end, or the inauguration for a general resurrection."

Thus, it would be daring to claim that, two thousand years ago, in some objective sense a new era really began, an era when everything was "created anew." The *experiences* Jesus' followers had were genuine and real. But the *interpretations* they gave them on the basis of the Old Testament and their own Jewish tradition—they are *far too exaggerated, too generalised*.<sup>4</sup>

We find the very same principle in the phase where Räisänen developed his hermeneutical theory, namely in the *Beyond*. The disillusionment of eschatology is crucial for his thinking both in its theoretical significance for the interpretation theory itself and the personal significance it has for the identity of the Church as well as individual Christians. For Räisänen, this issue proves that no doctrine should be "absolutized" in theology.

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<sup>3</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 80. Even though Räisänen disagrees somewhat with Bultmann on the message of the historical Jesus, their views concerning the parousia are similar. "*The mythical eschatology* is untenable for he simple reason that the parousia of Christ never took place as the New Testament expected. History did not come to an end, and, as every schoolboy knows, it will continue to run its course." Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 5; italics his. Räisänen still develops his criticism on the issue in *Challenges*, 237–243.

<sup>4</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 93 (1988) 23. Räisänen follows the standard existentialist Bultmannian interpretation of early eschatology. These views are perfectly expressed for instance in Conzelmann's RGG article on the parousia (*Parusie*). He states that the idea of parousia is bound by an apocalyptic world view and, therefore, one must not attempt to justify it by apology. Conzelmann, *RGG 3rd.ed.* 5 (1986) 131.

The absolutizing interpretation given by the early Christians to the "Christ event" would seem to be somewhat exaggerated—now, at the latest, from the perspective of two millennia of frustrated hope for the Kingdom of God.<sup>5</sup>

The non-occurrence of the parousia, for Räisänen, is a somewhat depressive reality that changes the whole nature of Christian belief. He calls it a "frustrated hope" that needs to be corrected. What is important to note is that this conviction never motivates Räisänen to leave the Christian church. Instead, in his later writings he challenges precisely the Christian (Lutheran) church to take this renewed view of world history seriously. He also criticizes theologians for not accepting the evident results of biblical scholarship in this important matter.

Till now, Finnish theology in particular has completely rejected the problems created by the fact that God's kingdom never came in the sense Jesus meant. If biblical scholarship can ever attain any results that should be considered highly trustworthy in respect of the proclamation of the historical Jesus, this is one of them.<sup>6</sup>

The "fact" that Jesus never came back has essential significance for Räisänen's personal theological thinking. In many respects, it is the most important theological or philosophy-of-religion type of issue on which he grounds his ideology and the reinterpretation of Christian thought. This is why he also proposes that the Finnish Lutheran Church, for which he educates new pastors at the University, should reconsider its teaching and admit that there will never be a parousia.<sup>7</sup>

The implications of this statement are huge. They result in a completely different view both of history and the future. As we shall see below in more detail, for Räisänen, there will be no cosmological events in the future that will somehow change human existence. The world will go on as it does following the premises that scientists detect or define in their rational analysis. God will not intervene human history. There will no day of wrath, neither will humankind encounter any divine judgment.

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<sup>5</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 136. According to Adam Räisänen here states that his proposals, "if followed faithfully, will undermine Christian claims to exclusivity and uniqueness." Adam, *Making Sense*, 100.

<sup>6</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 38.

<sup>7</sup> A similar tendency can be seen in a paper originally read in a seminar organized by the Academy of Finland in 1987. Here Räisänen first reminds his hearers that especially in Pauline Christianity personal experiences of Jesus were interpreted as his resurrection and this justified the expectation: he will return soon. "Over the years, the expectation of imminent return had to be mitigated." Räisänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 90.

Anthropology will be changed, too. Since the religious Christian interpretation of human life has turned out to be erroneous, human nature must be defined anew. People are now understood to live under the conditions of nature, just as Darwin and his colleagues taught. All that human beings can do in a situation like this is attempt to adapt their lives according to positive values and brotherly love. Such an adaptation, however, must be a rational process because the Bible with its mythological content is unable to help people living in the present day.

The disillusionment of eschatology is the first grand issue that Räsänen deals with in his early works. He states that it has direct consequences in the assessment of Christian doctrine. Like Reimarus, Räsänen suggests that this *Systema*, now one of Jesus' as well as the apostles', must be dissolved. Christian belief, devotion, and life must be applied to conform to the new, modern understanding of reality. Gradually, in Räsänen's theological thought, this point of departure leads to the rejection of several essential Christian doctrines.

### 5.2. *The Decline of Dogmatics: Anthropology, the Concept of Sin, and Judgment*

Both in his popular writings and scholarly works Räsänen repeatedly brings forth examples how biblical views of particular doctrines are defective or completely false. In his normative analysis he discusses numerous issues and covers all of the main *loci* of traditional dogma. Christian dogmatics, for Räsänen, is essentially an accidental construction that serves neither the contemporary Church nor society. As the development of ideas has constantly brought new and better ways of understanding the nature of human beings and human behavior, these ideological changes must now be considered as "religious" changes as well. For Räsänen's Weberian reading, they are now the standards according to which theology needs to be assessed.

Anthropology is a standard example of the new thinking. As far as theology is concerned, new conceptions of the human nature are no doubt dependent on the decline of eschatology, as noted above. Moreover, one must take the Enlightenment into consideration. Räsänen refers both to scientific naturalism and the heritage of Voltaire and Condillac, even though he usually omits particular names. After science started to enlighten the dark views with which the medieval Church had enslaved people for centuries, there was no turning back. Räsänen is convinced



that traditional conception of sin was merely a tool for the clergy to hold sincere Christians in their power. In the light of the scientific world view and at least after Darwin we must hold that the world is what it is—and what it has been from the very start. We are products of evolution, and our environment moulds us and creates our personality. Should we find problems in our moral behavior, the answer is in proper education. In many respects, Räisänen follows the idealist optimism of the Enlightenment.

The theory of evolution is important to Räisänen as he constructs his understanding of modern anthropology. Myths of the paradise and some kind of original nature of human beings need to be reinterpreted in terms of a scientific world view.

In Christian catechesis, a human being is described as a being who is sinful and corrupt. Traditional theology maintains that human beings have become such creatures only after the Fall [...] But people forget that even (reasonably) conservative theology cannot, after Darwin, believe that the Fall would be a real (pre)historical event so that things would be somehow different after it.<sup>8</sup>

In the Darwinian world there is no room for a biblical interpretation of life. The concept of sin, for Räisänen, does not account for the human condition correctly. Instead, human beings are independent and autonomic in this world. Individual people need to find their place themselves in this material world and construct their values without biblical premises.<sup>9</sup>

The problem of sin is closely linked with the questions of divine judgment and the nature of hell. If anthropology leaves no room for the concept of sin, there is not much reason to argue for God's judgment. Räisänen is convinced that primordial myths cannot help human beings to define their personality and condition in this life. In his writings, Räisänen is quite personal when treating these matters. In a 1991 article on heaven and hell (reprinted 1993) he writes that his personal history strongly affects his views about hell. He has a background in revivalist Christianity in Finland, and the idea of eternal damnation has been a living concern in that movement and its proclamation. Räisänen writes that, as a young man,

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<sup>8</sup> Räisänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 46. Among German biblical scholars, a similar departure from the biblical conception of the human condition can be found for instance in Lüdemann, *Der grosse Betrug*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> With these naturalist views Räisänen comes close to Spong who speaks about the "pre-evolutionary mind-set" of conservative theology and vehemently rejects the idea of sin in his works: "We are not fallen, sinful people who deserve to be punished." Spong, *Sins of Scripture*, 173; cf. 178.

the idea of avoiding hell had been more important for him than yearning for heaven. "The discreet use of power, that no one probably consciously felt as one, made me a 'victim of religion' and my life was thus predestined to work on this issue, even at the expense of other issues."<sup>10</sup>

Räisänen later investigated biblical descriptions of hell in their historical context and freed himself from his previous religious presuppositions. Therefore, he writes: "Religious coercion and images of hell that have been separated from the contexts where they were born spring forth from the same well: the certainty of owning the truth and a black-and-white world view." This is why the doctrine of hell sounds immoral. Räisänen prefers the alternative that hell should be interpreted as a state of mind.<sup>11</sup>

There is one problem still left. "It is difficult to get rid of hell without losing heaven as well." This is a rather crucial point where Räisänen suggests a materialist interpretation. For him the Kingdom of God and heaven are "humane utopias." They are "attempts to cope with the problems of suffering" in order to maintain a belief that this world is guided by a Being that is both omnipotent and good. He still uses transcendental language, though, and says that the Christian's goal is in other-worldly matters. This, however, is not what Christian life means for him. The utopia of the Kingdom of God belongs to this world with its human relations.<sup>12</sup>

For Räisänen, thus, the ideas of divine judgment and hell are expressions of the unjust nature of early Christian thought. In a good Weberian sense he sees them as negative beliefs that cannot be expected to further public welfare. They may instead even be harmful for individual believers. Such an interpretation is emphasized in one of Räisänen's printed speeches. When reading a paper at a conference of church workers and pastors, Räisänen questioned the relevance of these doctrines in the life of Finnish Lutheran congregations.

The doctrine of hell derives from the New Testament. It also represents the traditional beliefs of the church. Should one suspect eternal hell or mitigate its relevance, it would be understood as a criticism against church's faith as well as the faith of Jesus himself or that of the Gospels. [...] A criticism, however, is necessary even from an ethical point of departure. Not just because the idea of a judgment as such should be considered unethical, quite the contrary. The doctrine of hell that we find in Matthew is unethical because of the eternal nature of the punishment. This means that it is based

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<sup>10</sup> Räisänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Räisänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 36–37.

<sup>12</sup> Räisänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 37–38.

on revenge. Furthermore, the relation between crime and punishment is disproportionate (and therefore this is not a matter of justice!). If people despite all these facts believe in the existence of hell, they should at least stop speaking about God's love.<sup>13</sup>

Räisänen's Nietzschean attack on divine punishment accuses God of crimes against the humanity. The idea of eternal punishment is disproportionate to any crime and—to borrow one of Cupitt's terms here—should probably be considered psychological terrorism. The justification of such a bold statement evidently lies in Räisänen's altered view of the human condition. There is no original sin. Räisänen concludes that every human being is responsible merely for his or her own deeds. Just as the eternal fate of individuals should now be understood in Darwinian terms, so should judgment be assessed in terms of a earthly court of law. Every one should be accused and punished fairly. For Räisänen, the minor faults in human life can never result in an eternal damnation.

Such reasoning is theoretical, of course. It is done merely for the sake of argument and rhetoric. Räisänen no longer assumes that religious beliefs would be referential and true in any empirical sense. In fact, he is not attacking and rejecting "real" beliefs of the church. Instead, he is just rejecting false imaginings that appear to oppress human freedom. For Räisänen, religion is part of culture and cultural views can be constructive or destructive. As he addresses Lutheran pastors he wants to reveal oppressive language and promote a more humane way of understanding the world we live in.

Sociological interpretation can easily be detected in Räisänen's treatment of traditional Christian doctrines. Since our world view has changed and human thinking has gone in a completely new direction, religious explanations of this world and human life must, according to Räisänen, now be freed from old mythical and metaphysical perspectives. And as for Berger, so too for Räisänen, this is basically a religious task: as religion must be considered just a cultural phenomenon, one must constantly revise one's own religious tradition.

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<sup>13</sup> Räisänen, *Vartija* 5–6 (2004) 186. The parallel here with Spong is clear. He is famous for describing the God of the Bible as a "divine child abuser." Spong claims that the violent quality in the interpretation of Jesus' death falsely justifies the violent stories of the future, such as stories of eternal punishment and hell. Spong, *Sins of Scripture*, 169–171, 177–178.

### 5.3. *God, the Problem of Theodicy, and Predestination Theology*

Eschatology has not been the only theological theme whose reinterpretation has been fundamental to Räsänen's hermeneutics. From early in his career, the problem of theodicy has been crucial for his philosophy of religion. He has treated predestination theology in several different writings. The most important one of these—if we credit what Räsänen himself has said about the significance of his early works—is his 1972 study *The Idea of Divine Hardening*. In this monograph Räsänen investigates the notions of “leading astray” and “inciting to evil” both in the Quran and in the Bible, as well as in certain extra-canonical Jewish writings.

In his Quran-studies Räsänen met with the basic problems he later posed in the core of his hermeneutics: texts appear to contain “contradictory points of view.” In the Quran, according to Räsänen, one can find passages that speak both about the free will of human beings and about divine predestination. “Taken as they stand, statements like these are hardly logically compatible.” He noted that scholars have attempted to interpret such difficulties in several ways. Some scholars emphasize the “commanding position” of the idea of predestination, and some leave more room for human responsibility.<sup>14</sup>

Räsänen's own explanation starts with language. He assumes that it was not so much Muhammad's soteriology that changed during his lifetime. It was rather his use of language that changed when situations in his life changed. The basic explanation is sociological, which naturally suits the science of religion approach Räsänen is developing here. Räsänen states that in his theoretical theology Muhammad must have “been inclined” towards the idea of absolute predestination. However, it received explicit applications only after some practical conclusions had to be drawn. When Muhammad had to face the reality that not every hearer accepted his theology, his proclamation grew stricter. Thus, eventually, it was the social experience that produced the contradictory propositions in the Quran.<sup>15</sup>

From what is said above it is obvious that it is the *social experience* of Muhammad that has caused him to employ predestinarian language. The general theocentricity of his view is a necessary presupposition for such language; yet it is improbable that he would have taken recourse to such usage had it not been for his bitter experience with his fellow men. The notion of

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<sup>14</sup> Räsänen, *Divine Hardening*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Räsänen, *Divine Hardening*, 42.

God's leading men astray is for the prophet not, the intellectual solution of the difficult theoretical dilemma of the causes of unbelief. It is a practical weapon in his proclamation and a comfort in times of despair.<sup>16</sup>

In the New Testament the *locus classicus* that Räisänen mainly treats is Romans 9–11. After dealing with certain Old Testament passages, as well as Jewish writings, he turns to the explanation of this long passage in Paul. The basic setting for Räisänen is clear. These ideas reflect the same kind of sociological crisis as the passages investigated in Quran, and even the Old Testament: "The obstinacy of the Jews was a cause of deep sorrow for Paul." Paul writes in a situation where many Jews did not want to accept Jesus or his gospel.<sup>17</sup>

By explaining the Pauline passage in terms of traditional double predestination Räisänen investigates how Paul is able to deal with "the contrast between divine call and human action." The positive side, according to Räisänen, is first of all that the "choice made by God is by grace." The stubborn heart of many Jews demands more intense argument, though. God does harden the hearts of certain people in order to realize his design in this world: "he *hardens whomever He wills*." Paul uses similar predestinarian ideas so that he can point to the divine plan: "everything happens to fulfill God's *purpose*."<sup>18</sup>

This is not the place to assess Räisänen's explanation in detail, but one essential observation needs to be made. Since Räisänen reads the whole passage from the hermeneutical horizon of double predestination, he interprets individual examples and clauses through the same lens. Pharaoh's role is found in the hardening of his heart, not in his election and pardoning, as Paul appears to indicate. Räisänen pays attention to the idea that God hardens, but he neglects the view that God also has mercy on whomever he chooses, namely the weak (Jacob) and the sinners (instead of the pious Israelites). The same concerns the teaching about the vessels

<sup>16</sup> Räisänen, *Divine Hardening*, 44; emphasis his.

<sup>17</sup> Räisänen, *Divine Hardening*, 79. Romans 9–11 has a special place in Räisänen's studies. He has written several articles on the subject, and it has significance for his *Paul and the Law*. Furthermore, it is crucial for the main chapter 10 "True Israel" in *The Rise*, 247–282. For the articles, see e.g. the following: "Römer 9–11: Analyse eines geistigen Ringens," *ANRW* II.25.4 (1987) 2891–2939; "Paul, God, and Israel: Romans 9–11 in Recent Research," in *The Social World* (FS Kee), 178–206; *Marcion, Muhammad, and the Mahatma*, 17–32; "Paavaliin suuri ongelma: Israel Roomalaiskirjeen luvuissa 9–11" in *Paavali valokeilassa*, 125–145; and the latter's developed version in English, "Torn between two loyalties: Romans 9–11 and Paul's conflicting convictions," in *The Nordic Paul*, 19–39.

<sup>18</sup> Räisänen, *Divine Hardening*, 80–81.

of wrath. Where Räisänen, along with other adherents to double predestination, read the passage as one speaking about the election of individual people, evangelical interpretation reads it as one speaking about God's freedom to decide how He will save sinners, the vessels of wrath.<sup>19</sup>

In Romans (3:9; 5:12) Paul is quite clear when stating that all people (*panta*), Jews and pagans alike, live under sin. In the passage 9–11 he states that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (10:13).<sup>20</sup> The election, says Paul, is through the gospel, and this is how God turns the vessels of wrath into vessels of mercy. Räisänen, however, treats each example from a different point of view and, therefore, ends up with this statement: “The idea of double predestination cannot be explained away from the text.”<sup>21</sup>

Since Räisänen's emphasis, when explaining Romans 9–11, is on double predestination, his interpretation of Paul's reasoning culminates in accusations of inconsistency. “If Rom 9 contains the idea of absolute predestination—an idea apparently dropped by Paul in the sequel—Rom 10 shows that man's responsibility is by no means excluded.”<sup>22</sup> For Räisänen, Paul writes like Muhammad. When Paul needs to “solve the problem of the stubbornness” of Israel, he “arrives at predestinarian lines.” But this is just “a piece of *rational theology*.” In his “role as a practical preacher,” Paul is “a voluntarist, appealing by all means to the will of his hearers.” Räisänen explains alleged inconsistencies both in the Quran and in Paul's writings in a similar manner.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> This is an issue which van Spanje treats in detail, van Spanje, *Inconsistency*, 91–102.

<sup>20</sup> There is a dispute, thus, between two different interpretations of Romans. Räisänen rejects the holistic interpretation of human corruption and supports a particularistic view.

<sup>21</sup> For my analysis on the subject, see Eskola, *Theodicy and Predestination*, 149–160; 165–177. For the quotation, see Räisänen, *Divine Hardening*, 82. My critical remark is that Räisänen does not *arrive* at the idea of double predestination through an analysis; he presumes it and explains different Pauline examples in light of this presumption.

<sup>22</sup> Räisänen, *Divine Hardening*, 85. In his analysis van Spanje says that Räisänen “comes to the conclusion that there are *two important inconsistencies*” in the passage. “The first one concerns the relation between divine predestination and human responsibility,” and the second one which Räisänen regards as more important: “Paul has two mutually exclusive solutions for the problem of God's trustworthiness.” On the one hand Paul appears to use the argument that Israel was not elected but hardened, and on the other hand God is said to be loyal to his promises and election of Israel. Van Spanje, *Inconsistency*, 98–99.

<sup>23</sup> Räisänen, *Divine Hardening*, 86. There is clearly a logical inconsistency here. If Paul stated that God acts according to double predestination, as Räisänen argues, the idea of divine hardening should be accepted. And if this is so, then Räisänen is wrong to claim that the salvation of Israel is inconsistent because, in Räisänen's own words, that would mean merely the salvation of the elect.

This is how Räisänen gradually ends up with his hermeneutical theory explaining a complete, universal way of producing religious statements. Social experience forces individuals to find practical solutions to problems in their message.

The talk of God's "negative" acts is everywhere in one way or another connected with the *social experience* of the individual or the community. In the case of Muhammad there is sufficient material so that the development can be described: the prophet begins to use predestinarian language only after having met with bitter resistance from his compatriots.<sup>24</sup>

Paul stands in a similar situation. "Jesus is rejected by the Jews, God's own people." This makes him create a predestinarian soteriology. "Paul writes his strictly predestinarian sentences while handling with this '*heilsgeschichtlich*' dilemma, for him both a theoretical and an acute existential problem."<sup>25</sup> Räisänen states that as people like Paul or Muhammad face social problems they produce theology in order to solve the problems they have personally drifted into. This, for him, is the proper science of religion approach to Paul's writings.

Moreover, Räisänen happens to refer to Bultmann on the same occasion. As Räisänen states that the basic point of departure for theological reasoning here is the "apparent contradictions" found in the texts, he remarks that Bultmann has noted the same problem when interpreting Paul. "Interpreting Paul's theology Bultmann writes that if the apostle's predestinarian statements be taken literally, 'an insoluble contradiction results, for a faith brought about by God outside man's decision would obviously not be genuine obedience'."<sup>26</sup>

Bultmann's solution is not sufficient for Räisänen. As Bultmann no longer takes the predestinarian statements literally, he falls into harmonizing. The reason is clear, though. For Bultmann a human being's authentic self-directing to the kerygma is precisely a decision of faith. It is an eschatological occurrence. It is a decision that belongs to faith's very nature as obedience. Therefore, for Bultmann, predestinarian statements must not be taken literally. Once again Räisänen goes farther. He claims that Bultmann has seen the problem, but that he just could not bear Paul's apparent contradictions. Räisänen does, and his answer is that particular

<sup>24</sup> Räisänen, *Divine Hardening*, 96; emphasis his.

<sup>25</sup> Räisänen, *Divine Hardening*, 96.

<sup>26</sup> Räisänen, *Divine Hardening*, 98.



theology in a particular situation is a rational conclusion that serves practical desires and ambitions.<sup>27</sup>

Räisänen's treatment of the theme of divine hardening clearly shows his Wolfenbüttelian attitude and explains the nature of his "hermeneutics of contradiction." Räisänen is not interested, for instance, in explaining Paul's thought world in the context of Second Temple Jewish discussion on theodicy but, instead, builds on one constructed contradiction that he can point out in Paul's treatment of the subject. In his interpretation, Räisänen is completely dependent on Quran-criticism and its implications. The Bible must be read like any other book, in other words like the Quran. He starts with alleged inconsistencies in the writing and makes them the explanatory key for the whole text. The spirit of Reimarus can be seen in his ideological attitude: contradictions serve as evidence for the claim that there is no unified, consistent theology in the sense of divine revelation in the Bible. This is what Räisänen has called the "fair play" argument. If one holds that the Bible might be divine revelation, also other scriptures may be such. But the materialist reality has proven that contradictory works like these cannot be the inerrant word of God.

As we saw in the chapter dealing with Quran-criticism's significance for the chain of interpretation theory, Räisänen's idea of "social experience" became the center of the hermeneutical process. This had important ramifications. Räisänen treats different expressions in these books, the Bible and the Quran, like any cultural narrative. After this choice, Räisänen proceeds to the sociological reduction and creates an explanation for the genesis of different theological expressions.

Hence the psychological explanation. As we pointed out in chapter 2, this kind of hermeneutics must inevitably lead to some kind of psychologization of religious experience. Räisänen detects motives that produce particular expressions of faith. He attempts to explain Paul by suggesting how his personal struggles with Israel and the Mosaic law produced contradictory statements that have only a practical goal (see 4.6). For Räisänen, this is the way to find a general pattern that can be detected in many different writings. He explains religion like a true science-of-religion scholar. No matter what the religious text, it contains the pattern of personal reflection on social experience. This, of course, was the main idea in Räisänen's hermeneutical article *Authority* from the same year 1972. The explications of experience produce a chain of interpretation. Religious

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<sup>27</sup> See Bultmann, *Theology I*, 329–330.



statements are just cultural products and their innermost nature can be explained as such.<sup>28</sup>

From this perspective, the problem of theodicy for Räisänen is thus just a matter of false reasoning. As religious writers meet with difficult situations their experience compels them to develop theological solutions. Their conception of God cannot hold. This is how the traditional problem of theodicy comes to be discussed in the sphere of philosophy of religion. How can one maintain belief in an omnipotent God when one faces the problem that events in this world do not conform to His plans? In his early works Räisänen ends up with rationalist pessimism. There is no God that would work among people in present history. If one is to speak of God, one must remain in the sphere of general principles. There is no divine predestination. What is left is human responsibility. If human beings are to make this world a better place, they themselves must work towards this.<sup>29</sup>

And, for Räisänen, there is much to be done. In his cultural analysis he is not so shallow that he fails to admit the reality of evil. He probably does not call it sin, but he addresses the problems themselves. In his Finnish article "Koraanin ja Raamatun Jumala" ("The Quran's and the Bible's God") Räisänen treats the problem of theodicy in a Weberian sociology of religion sense and discusses it from the point of view of the reality of evil. He first states that both the Bible and the Quran face frustration: real history does not correspond with the expectations. God just does not seem to act as He has promised. Then Räisänen hints at a hermeneutical conclusion by asking: what should we do with this problem in our present situation?

Räisänen searches for the answer through more recent examples as well. He proceeds to Hitler and the horrors of Rwanda. The evilness of this world is obvious and no contemporary theology can bypass it. What should one think about God in the middle of a history like this?

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<sup>28</sup> Räisänen's hermeneutical idea is actually close to the Bultmannian *Sitz im Leben* analysis. Bultmann explained the genesis of different (supernatural or irrational) Gospel stories by referring to social problems and theological tensions between early Christian groups. For him, the motive is able to reveal the true nature of the narrative. See e.g. Bultmann, *Geschichte*, 4–6.

<sup>29</sup> Räisänen has treated the concept of God in the context of the problem of theodicy also in his Finnish writings, see for instance Räisänen, *Rosoinen Raamattu*, 162–163. His argumentation there, however, does not bring new ideas to the discussion.

A critical question for the entire prophetic tradition goes as follows: is the picture of an omnipotent God of history plausible? Can Exodus-faith and trust in the merciful guidance of the Omnipotent carry the weight of the problems posed by Auschwitz and Hiroshima? Who would have the nerve to interpret the founding of the state of Israel as a new Exodus after the "holocaust." This would make Hitler God's secret weapon serving a higher purpose.<sup>30</sup>

Sociology of religion turns here into philosophy of religion. Theodicy, for Räsänen, is no longer a theoretical issue to be solved in different ways by different religions. Instead, it has become an argument for the deconstruction of classical Christian doctrine.

Should we not listen more seriously to those who interpret the theology of the cross in the New Testament as the opposite of all "success-theology," and in such a radical way that they urge one to choose between the omnipotent and suffering God?<sup>31</sup>

In this respect the problem of theodicy, for Räsänen, is finally not just a matter of false reasoning. He provides the now normative answers. The traditional understanding fosters false conceptions of God and even a wrong way to understand religion. His examples are provocative but he does not elaborate much. In a Darwinian world, suffering is a reality but, taken philosophically, it is not at all clear what kind of inferences one should make from this fact. Räsänen only claims that a rationalist theologian should not speak of an omnipotent God. This issue has become crucial to some recent theological discussions, and we shall return to it when exploring contemporary questions.

In Räsänen's hermeneutics, finally, the whole conception of God is dissolved. His treatment of the problem of theodicy and different expressions of predestinarian theology drive all inferences to one and the same conclusion. There is no omnipotent God who directs history. There is not even a God who follows the events of the world or watches over people's lives. According to his new materialist hermeneutics, the Christian doctrine of God is false. It belongs to a *Systema* that is no longer relevant in modern times. A true scientific analysis is able to explicate the psychosocial process that produces different conceptions of the divine being. And the very same analysis provides tools for presenting contemporary people with a more truthful interpretation of faith.

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<sup>30</sup> Räsänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 136.

<sup>31</sup> Räsänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 136–137.

5.4. *Reinterpreting the Principles of Religion: Christology, Atonement, and Salvation*

Räisänen contests more than the traditional biblical concept of God as well as attacking occasional doctrines that do not fit a modern way of thinking. He also discusses the principles of soteriology. Like his famous predecessors, Räisänen wants to reinterpret almost everything the New Testament says about God and salvation. Christology belongs naturally to the central issues that must be dealt with should one want to grapple with standard Christian theology. Räisänen does treat some of the Christological debates in his monographs, and the least one can say is that his views are implied in his books on the Gospels, and Paul and the law. Nevertheless, also in this case the most illuminating examples—written before the *Rise*—can be found in his Finnish articles.

The question about Christology is, of course, sensitive. This is probably why Räisänen has often adopted the style of expressing his own ideas by quoting and presenting the radical views of other scholars. This is a perfect way of provoking discussion and maintaining a distance from the issue simultaneously. This may have been practical, too, because in Finland as in many other countries the debate over historical-critical investigation has been heated.

Practical examples make the setting clear easily enough. In a 1977 article Räisänen comments on a new book published in Great Britain that same year, *The Myth of God Incarnate*. The book that later became rather famous, edited by John Hick, questioned the incarnation as thoroughly as it could be done. Read in the context of the history of New Testament interpretation, Hick's collection is a short popularization of the German history-of-religions school results, building for instance on the *theios anēr* theory.<sup>32</sup> It is filled with ideology and the articles aim at a complete revision of traditional Christian faith.

The basic idea in the book is simple. The interpretation of Jesus' incarnation as a myth, or a "mythological idea," is a positive invention and helps theologians to resolve the problem of historical investigation. Scholars can abandon the literary meaning of such Christology and find solutions for the contemporary church. Incarnation, as a myth, is no longer considered literally true. Nevertheless, it is supposed to create a certain positive attitude in those who hear of it. So, the "truth" of the myth is

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<sup>32</sup> See Young, *Myth*, 87–96, 100–101.

practical. Its consequences can be seen in the lives of Christians living in a community. By following Jesus one can experience the presence of God.<sup>33</sup>

Räisänen's description here sounds quite like the Bultmannian interpretations written several decades earlier. This, however, is not the main point the authors wish to make. Räisänen continues by referring to Frances Young's article. Abandoning the doctrine of the incarnation has even more far reaching consequences, and these need to be taken seriously in theological debate.

The abandoning of a literal view of the incarnation would clearly affect the dialogue between religions. Taken literally, the idea of the incarnation means that Jesus Christ is the only possible Savior. Without him the confessors of other religions have no hope. The view of the early Christians who believed in Jesus' unique, irreplaceable status, however, is dependent on their eschatology that we can no longer literally believe (Young). A mythical interpretation of the incarnation makes a truly global perspective possible. We can admit that God has acted and does act outside the Jewish-Christian tradition in order to save humankind by other means (Hick).<sup>34</sup>

In the beginning of the article Räisänen has already described the diversity of New Testament Christology, naturally by referring to examples taken from *The Myth of God Incarnate* itself. He contrasts early adoptionist Christology, which according to the theory is found in the beginning of Romans and Acts, with later doctrine of the incarnation. Even John's high Christology is now separated from later dogma. This is no minor issue for Räisänen, as he states: "This result should surely have some significance for the church's interpretation of doctrine."<sup>35</sup>

The Wolfenbüttelian spirit now extends to the treatment of Christology. Räisänen is convinced that the so-called doctrines are only parts of an imaginary *Systema* that has been constructed differently in different congregations and groups. As a scholar, he is not interested merely in analyzing the historical development of different views or the redactional layers of the Gospel tradition. Räisänen's aim is higher. All this should affect the (Lutheran) church's view of doctrine—and especially change its attitudes on alleged heresies. Historical-critical study can lead the church into an open dialogue with other religions if it only acknowledges that Jesus is

<sup>33</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyttä etsimässä*, 58. Cf. Hick, *Myth*, 172–175.

<sup>34</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyttä etsimässä*, 59. Räisänen does remark, though, that the authors use theistic language and that this does not sound very coherent, given the situation. For the original, see Young, *Myth*, 117–119; Hick, *Myth*, 184.

<sup>35</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyttä etsimässä*, 55.

not a God incarnate or the only possible redeemer and Savior of sinners. A true humanist church never rejects any sincere religious thinker as a heretic.<sup>36</sup>

Christology, thus, can once more serve as an example of how the sociological reading is able to free theologians from creating hierarchic and oppressive systems of doctrine. For Räisänen, high Christology has been a weapon in the hands of certain church leaders who used it in the power-struggles of early communities. An openness to the new sociology of religion will, according to his views, open up a "truly global perspective" where no religion can claim to have the exclusive wisdom of salvation. In Hick's collection his views are anticipated by Cupitt who speaks about the negative effects the doctrine of the incarnation has had in Church history.

From all this I conclude that the doctrine of incarnation has had some harmful effects upon the understanding of Jesus' message, on the understanding of his relation to God and even upon faith in God. For Jesus' emphasis upon the divine transcendence, on the disjunction of things divine and human and the need for choice, it substituted a world-view which stressed continuity, authority and due obedience (1). It weakened appreciation of his human work (2). It tended to create a cult of the divine Christ which let Deity itself fade into the background (3), and when God the Father was reaffirmed, he was envisaged as an old man (4).<sup>37</sup>

Cupitt's Harnackian moralism can be detected throughout in the collection. This is only to be expected since the decline of Christology is usually supported by the Kantian ethical ideal—a paradox that can be seen directly in Cupitt's text: authority and obedience are rejected just in order to reinstate the strict obedience to moral values. Räisänen follows Cupitt's ideas only partly but there is one feature that unites these two scholars. The latter claims that, based on the new view on the doctrine of the incarnation, the relativity of all doctrines must follow. "What we have

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<sup>36</sup> Wiles, for instance, is confident that the rejection of the incarnation does not lead to the rejection of Christian faith entirely: "I have been arguing that its abandonment as a metaphysical claim about the person of Jesus (for which there seems to me to be a strong case) would not involve the abandonment of all the religious claims normally associated with it." Wiles, *Myth*, 9. Being a true radical, though, he admits that it "would make a difference." Also Wiles looks back to Harnack when saying: "But the truth of God's self-giving love and the role of Jesus in bringing that vision to life in the world would remain."

<sup>37</sup> Cupitt, *Myth*, 145.

been taught to call 'orthodoxy' was in fact merely the form of Christianity which happened to triumph over the others."<sup>38</sup>

Räisänen's historical view is basically the one that has governed demythologized theology from the days of Reimarus: Jesus was just a sophisticated, intelligent Jew who never wanted to start a new religion. "There was nothing Messianic in Jesus' life and death, and Judaism has had good arguments in rejecting all Christian claims concerning those issues."<sup>39</sup> In this respect Christology, for Räisänen, is just a battlefield where imaginary ideas are misused in the violent struggles of the early church.

A similar conclusion is true for the doctrine of atonement. In an early article published in *Kotimaa*, one of the main journals in the Lutheran Church, in 1972 (reprinted 1984) Räisänen uses Bultmann as his alter ego. By presenting a short summary of his demythologizing-program Räisänen in fact describes how the historical-critical school sees Jesus' person and meaning.

It would be futile to try make people believe in demons now and to heal scizophrenia by exorcism. It is futile to demand that they wait for the Son of Man to come in the clouds, since every generation for 2000 years has expected him to, according to the signs, during their own lifetime. It is futile to demand that anyone believe that a heavenly divine being was incarnated and became a human being, gave his blood as a sacrifice for the sins of humankind, and then returned to his heavenly home.<sup>40</sup>

Just before this passage Räisänen refers to the failure of eschatology. All theology must be submitted to reconsideration because Jesus never returned. His expectations were not fulfilled. Christianity cannot be the religion Jesus and his first followers assumed it was. This statement has several implications that are inevitable for any historical-critical thinker in the church. Myths cannot be taken at their word. The idea of sacrifice

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<sup>38</sup> Cupitt, *Myth*, 145. This proves that the discussion concerning orthodoxy has been around ever since 1977. When making it a leading theme in the *Rise* Räisänen was relying on a long tradition.

<sup>39</sup> Räisänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 49. Bultmann's views popularized this issue even though, for Bultmann himself, the reason for the emergence of high Christology was the influence of the Gnostic *Erlöser-Mythus* (Redeemer-myth). "Gnostic influence suggests that this Christ, who died and rose again, was not a mere human being but a God-man." Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 8. "The mythology of the New Testament is in essence that of Jewish apocalyptic and the Gnostic redemption myths." Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 15. Räisänen probably no longer accepts such a Gnostic explanation but, despite that, he never questions the evolutionary pattern of the emergence of Christology.

<sup>40</sup> Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 149; cf. Bultmann, *Neues Testament und Mythologie*, 19–20.

is but an ancient myth giving expression to people's ancient view on how God could be encountered. As there is no sin in the Darwinian world, atonement becomes incomprehensible. To state the opposite would lead the church practically to Gnosticism—as Bultmann claimed—but this is something Räsänen never says aloud. The conclusion is obvious, though. Contemporary Christians no longer need that doctrine.<sup>41</sup>

And as always, so in this article, the historical-critical view on the Bible means a new, liberated conception of how Christian faith should be understood. The primary message of the New Testament, for these writers, is the good news of how human beings can find a new way of seeing themselves and their possibilities in God's world. In this sense, Räsänen really proposes a new *Systema*. He speaks of a spiritual tradition that is irreplaceable for him. It can be reduced to words such as “truth, freedom, love, and joy.”<sup>42</sup>

In a later writing, “Jesus Christ,” for Räsänen, is finally just a crucial “symbol” of his religious tradition. Jesus symbolizes good humanistic values that serve life. It (not “he” as a symbol) represents such values as love, hope, faith in living, authenticity, and responsibility. These human virtues are not timeless ideas exposed by the Scriptures, though. Rather, they are values, according to which the mythical and in itself not very acceptable Bible can be reinterpreted in the present day. They are current values, not divine ideas of some kind of timeless revelation.<sup>43</sup>

What can salvation mean in this kind of theological setting? Eschatology, for Räsänen, is not a reality. He never says anything specific about the possibility of life after death. Instead, his materialist statements make even the idea impossible. Salvation in this kind of context inevitably turns out to be prosaic: it is a matter of Kantian optimism where society gradually learns to live in harmony. These features will be discussed later in passages that more clearly grapple with this issue.

All in all, Räsänen intentionally changes the principles of religion in his writings. He may be convinced that a New Testament theology is impossible but, nevertheless, he himself has a strictly structured—immanent and naturalist—system of theology. And, as noted several times above, these details have been treated and deconstructed long before Räsänen sets up for writing his *Rise*. His rejection of all the main Christian doctrines

<sup>41</sup> Räsänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 148–149.

<sup>42</sup> Räsänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 150.

<sup>43</sup> Räsänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 51–52.



derives from the historical-critical treatment of New Testament texts, and it is completed by his sociological hermeneutics that treats doctrinal beliefs merely as human imaginings, the panorama of “natural theology,” as he says in his early works.

### 5.5. *Confessions as Poetry: On the Way to Universalism*

Creeds, in Räsänen’s theology, are usually seen in a negative light. Several examples in the analysis above have shown that, in many of his writings, Räsänen contests both the content and the value of ecclesiastical confessions. They not only violently restrict the freedom of thought, they also create the illusion that pure faith implies an adoption of a systematic model that represents only one small current in early Christianity. This is why Räsänen completely reinterprets creeds and opposes credal Christianity in his writings.

Clear already in his evaluation of *The Myth of God Incarnate* is that Räsänen has often suggested that the doctrine of Trinity has no foundation in the Bible. He considers it merely an invention of the later post-canonical Church. In his review he sums up the theology of the above-mentioned book: “Jesus never claimed to be the second person of the Trinity.” Only some very few traditions in the New Testament, mainly in John, hint in that direction. Therefore, both theologians and the Church have two interpretive possibilities: “Catholic” and “radical.”

A “Catholic” conclusion: later theology has nevertheless succeeded in expressing a truth that was only implicit in Jesus’ proclamation. Jesus’ teaching was a seed out of which then—justifiably—grew the Christology of the Nicene Creed. A “radical” conclusion: the interpretation of the incarnation is a single, time-bound model of interpretation among many others. We are not bound to the language and thinking of ancient culture but we are allowed to interpret Jesus’ meaning from the premises of our own culture.<sup>44</sup>

The abandonment of the Trinity receives several articulations in Räsänen’s writings. It is naturally quite important in his writings on the relation between the Bible and the Quran. He first states: “Contemporary biblical scholarship is well aware that there are little grounds for the later doctrine of Trinity in the New Testament.”<sup>45</sup> Then he continues saying that this might help the dialogue between Christianity and Islam. The essential

<sup>44</sup> Räsänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 62.

<sup>45</sup> Räsänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 71.



reason for this, as we have seen in earlier analyses, is Räisänen's claim that some traits in New Testament Christology resemble the Quran's view of Jesus.

In *Authority* Räisänen widens the horizon to include other religions. "Liberalism confesses the historical sources of spiritual life, such as the meaning of the Bible for Western people," he says first. Then, however, restrictions relativize the significance of history altogether: "but it abandons any thought of an exclusive truth put in the form of a confession of faith; it 'confesses that the way to God is possible also without Christ and that Asians can find it without the Bible'."<sup>46</sup> As such religious universalism is indisputable for Räisänen, creeds must not become an obstacle to honest dialogue with other religions.

Creeds, special confessions of faith, are Räisänen's subject in several later articles. In one of the most informative and even provocative passages he gives his ideas new wording, denying the possibility of writing any new radical confessions:

I do not really believe in the sensibleness of new confessions. We can preserve the old ones as documents of certain phases of in an eternal process. More important than the construction of new confessions would be to find a new way to consider the old ones. They can be used for worship in common meetings as far as they can be interpreted as poetic pictures of the meaning of the movement starting from Jesus, or what it has meant before.<sup>47</sup>

Räisänen's church is like a museum preserving old artifacts that have aesthetic value.<sup>48</sup> In his Weberian reading confessions represent pre-modern symbolic worlds that are now destined to be replaced by new readings. In real life, new ideas will prove better than the old ones. This is why confessions of faith are mere poetry. They are language of love—and should it turn out otherwise they would need to be rejected and abandoned. Räisänen joins scholars who state that sacred authority is destructive.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 77 (1972) 85.

<sup>47</sup> Räisänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 52–53.

<sup>48</sup> This too is a view that Räisänen shares with Cupitt. In his *The Old Creed and the New* the latter proposes a new creed that is worth quoting here: "True religion is your own voice, if you can but find it. True religion is, in every sense, to own one's own life. True religion is pure solar affirmation of life, in full acknowledgement of its utter gratuitousness, its contingency, its transience, and even its nothingness. True religion is productive value-realizing action in the public world. Faith is not a matter of holding on to anything; faith is simply a letting-go. It laughs at anxiety; it floats free." Cupitt, *Creed*, 3; cf. 4–9.

<sup>49</sup> Cupitt continues: "Now, however, we must strive to free ourselves from all ideas of an objectively existing infinite concentration of sacred authority and power—a sort of

Confessions can work if we let them be language of love; as metaphysics they become ballasts. One may interpret the Apostolic Confession quite well in this way, and probably the Nicene-Constantinople Creed [Nicene Creed] is not impossible to interpret in a poetical sense. The Athanasian Creed, however, with its curses is hopelessly different, and it would be proper to abandon it.<sup>50</sup>

It is no wonder that Räsänen distances himself from the Athanasian Creed (*Quicumque Vult*), since its opening words make his position impossible: “Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.” Creeds, for Räsänen, are naturally secondary material due to the fact that they are written late and, in his estimation, have little to do with the Bible.

The examples treated in this analysis show that, during his career, Räsänen has denied and rejected practically all essential Christian doctrines. He has reinterpreted traditional views about God and Christ, not to mention the Holy Spirit. He contests biblical anthropology, the concept of sin, and the idea of eternal judgment. And in continuity with these ideas, he disputes atonement, redemption, and eternal salvation in its traditional sense. There is no soteriology or salvation history in his so-called theology—but one must remember that Räsänen has also abandoned the term biblical theology as such. “Theology” would be saying too much. There is only a history of ideas, treated in a religious context.

We have seen several passages that show this, and there are many more that could be added. For instance in a review of a book on Paul, written by one of his pupils, Kari Kuula, Räsänen challenges the Church to take the new findings of research into uncompromising consideration.

On the basis of Kuula’s book, Paul’s thinking is—or it should be—a problem for the Lutheran Church at least concerning the doctrines of Trinity, grace, baptism and Holy Communion, as well as anthropology and “*Volkskirche*” thinking.<sup>51</sup>

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sacred black hole—and of that Power’s self-delegation to the leadership in the Church.” Cupitt, *Creed*, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Räsänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 53. Similarities with Cupitt are replete: “Finally—and this is the culminating point—O[ld Creed], the traditional faith in God, in the cosmic order, and in our own supernatural destiny, was always metaphysical.” Cupitt, *Creed*, 78.

<sup>51</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 1 (2002) 80. In Finland the difficult term “*Volkskirche*” (taken here from German since it has no good English translation) means simply a late version of a state Church where people still belong to the Church but one in which the state and Church have been separated. The issue itself is not important here.

This list of doctrines covers almost all significant issues mentioning also the Protestant sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. Even though Räisänen himself seldom speaks of the sacraments, it is obvious that they, too, belong also to his own list of historical artifacts. As mythical rites they have as little significance as the Creeds.

Räisänen's Wolfenbüttelian disposition thus resembles that of Reimarus. If any doctrines can be found in the New Testament writings—and there must be many so that they can contradict each other—they are merely personal convictions that have no universal significance. And what is more important still: many of them may be unsuitable for and injurious to the mental health of human beings. Some of them may support pessimistic views of human nature, and some of them may even encourage negative or discriminatory values. This is why the contemporary church must be freed from traditional doctrines. Räisänen lists practically all essential doctrines that make Christianity particular and exclusive. A rational religion must be universal, as Kant suggested, and it must be capable of tearing down all fences. There are neither heresies nor false beliefs, apart from some negative Christian beliefs, that is. Even though Räisänen is no Deist, he does support a general view of religion that looks like Deism: a common religion for all people who wish to worship a deity that apparently is behind this extraordinary reality.

Räisänen is no Deist, but he may be a universalist. His *Authority* proves that already as a young scholar he was acquainted with a group of American liberals called the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship (UUCF). Morton Enslin's rather rare article that Räisänen uses and also quotes extensively in his own work is published in the UUCF periodical *The Unitarian Universalist Christian*. This contact has probably been nothing more than an attempt to find sympathisers in the emerging liberal movement and in the middle of fierce debates over divine revelation and the authority of the Bible. As we attempt to reconstruct Räisänen's own ideological stance after abandoning the Church's traditional doctrines, however, it is interesting to note the close relationship between his thinking and the *Unitarian Universalist Christian Affirmations* of the UUCF.<sup>52</sup>

A short comparison of thought will shed more light on the issue. In these Affirmations particular principles are defined according to which Christian thought should be directed. The issues that are mentioned are

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<sup>52</sup> See the Internet version of the Affirmations in: *Unitarian Universalist Christian Affirmations*, <http://www.uuchristian.org/Articles/LiberalChristianity.html>.

the standard humanist fare: freedom of spirit, tolerance, and intellectual integrity. Räisänen shares the group's basic desire to contest credal Christianity as the statement "refuses to endorse as final and sufficient any particular creed of the historical Church." This has been also Räisänen's main claim from the 1972 article onwards.<sup>53</sup>

Even though it is true that a definition of "freedom of spirit," that as a principle is so important for Räisänen, can easily be constructed almost on the basis of any kind of theological liberalism, the definition UUCF provides could as well come from Räisänen's own pen.

Freedom of Spirit. Unitarian Universalist Christianity affirms as its prime duty, and its place in the historical development of institutional Christianity, the delicate task of preserving freedom of the spirit within the Christian community, and recognizes the legitimate claims of plurality of religious interpretations and their expressions within the essential unity and corporate life of the Church.<sup>54</sup>

Räisänen's hermeneutics never stopped with the formal theory of chain of interpretation. His hermeneutical ambition has also been expressed by the fair play argument in its various forms: any new interpretation of tradition is valid—as valid as any others as mere expressions of a particular symbolic world. The plurality of religious interpretations, for Räisänen, is a fact, and any attempt to restrict it will be rejected as orthodoxy's cruel hunting down of heresy. This is also the spirit of the UUCF Affirmations.

Furthermore, in the UUCF paper, an outline of proper liberal theology is presented. Instead of traditional anthropology (hamartology) and soteriology, human dignity is emphasized. The basic concern of the writers resembles that of Räisänen. Human life must be interpreted in terms of Enlightenment rationalism. Instead of clinging to ancient mythical descriptions of the human condition, the Affirmations recognize "human beings as free and sacred personalities." It is interesting that religious terminology and a concept of the sacred continues to be important for these writers.

Despite all theological limitations, the ideology in the Affirmations is undoubtedly Theist. This is a feature that has aroused discussion often in the field of liberal biblical theology. Räisänen with his a/theology shares in the same problem.<sup>55</sup> It is not easy to abandon biblical terminology

<sup>53</sup> See above, and especially Räisänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 52–53.

<sup>54</sup> *Unitarian Universalist Christian Affirmations*, <http://www.uuchristian.org/Articles/LiberalChristianity.html>.

<sup>55</sup> In spite of his materialism, Räisänen is ineluctably guilty of using theistic language—the same mistake he accused the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate* of making. Räisänen

when one attempts to express something constructive about the positive values of human life. Räisänen even refuses to leave the Christian community while, at the level of rational inference, that might appear to be a consistent solution.<sup>56</sup>

The nature of Christian life is described in an identical way in both the Affirmations and Räisänen's works. Christian symbols represent "faith, hope, and love." The ethical values "inherent in the Christian gospel" will be affirmed through "social action." Even the idea of universalist tolerance between different religions is a key factor for both. UUCF "seeks to promote an understanding and appreciation of religious traditions other than those within the Christian heritage." Räisänen, of course, sees the tolerant acceptance of religious experiences in different religions, particularly in Islam and Christianity, as the only means of bringing hope to the difficult controversies that these religions face today.<sup>57</sup>

These examples prove, at least on the level of analogy, that the "liberalism"—if the meaning of the word is understood in the present context—Räisänen has adopted does have features that occur also elsewhere in theological liberalism in the West. The results from this chapter prove that Räisänen has attempted to abolish the doctrinal tradition of Christianity. Partly, it must be a consequence of his Wredean history-of-religions approach but, partly, it is just a feature of his historical criticism of the Bible. This background alone, however, does not explain the theological conclusions Räisänen makes after all his analyses.

As we attempt to define the nature of the theological stance that directs his hermeneutical theory, universalism begins to garner a special significance. There are many other currents that no longer explain his theology. Avoiding the Scylla and Charybdis of identification here, we can rule out

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is somewhat more traditional in his writings than his theory should allow. He speaks lightly about God, he knows what this God is doing, even though he never tells the reader how he knows it. And furthermore, he knows how God works both among those whom the Bible addresses, and among all religions that in fact are condemned in the Scriptures.

<sup>56</sup> In some of his Finnish writings Räisänen is quite personal and writes about the discussions he has had over the issue during his career. People have asked him why he has stayed in the Church. Räisänen answers that, even though it would have been a logical move to leave, Christian symbols still mean for him something on a level that is not rational. Räisänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 132.

<sup>57</sup> For Räisänen's views on this, see above 5.4. Adam, in another context, has made a similar observation concerning Räisänen's ideological aims: "Räisänen writes from his concern that world peace may rest upon our capacity to attain a kind of international understanding that would ultimately rest upon interreligious understanding." Adam, *Making Sense*, 99.

some alternatives. On the one hand, Räsänen apparently does not belong to Neo-Kantian liberal Protestantism (Neuprotestantismus) with its solely ethical interpretation of the Christian message. Neither is he a Heideggerian existentialist like Bultmann—and this becomes even clearer as we remember that the latter's ideology stems partly from the former. On the other hand, he is not a complete nihilist like the adherents of the death-of-God movement. This, to be precise, is a matter of speculation, though. He does not take the atheist interpretation to its limit, either in its Nietzschean materialist form or the Christian atheist form, but his view undeniably has several atheistic features.<sup>58</sup>

Hence the liberal universalism. As noted, Räsänen's theology has several Universalist features. He opposes credal Christianity and demands freedom of spirit. He argues for human dignity and holds ethical symbols in high regard. And most importantly: he believes in the Universalist doctrine of equality of religions. Traditional eschatology is replaced by an almost Kantian ideal of the tolerant and peaceful coexistence of religions. Räsänen has spent much time analyzing the Quran and in several writings he argues for the practically identical substructure of both Islam and Christianity. Räsänen could even be called a Unitarian Universalist because he has adopted a cultural mission of mitigating the controversies between these religions.

Despite all this, in a philosophical sense, Räsänen is a strict nominalist, at least as far as religious language is concerned. This complicates his ideological ambitions. Räsänen never allows transcendental arguments into the discussion, and his theory also excludes theological realism. It is impossible for him to accept that any doctrinal statement could have permanent meaning or transcendental value. For some reason, however, he does present distinct claims about the nature of religion, as we saw above. This means that he is convinced that rational thought is able to distinguish between a false understanding of religion and a proper understanding of religion. He adopts several (unorthodox) doctrinal statements

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<sup>58</sup> One reservation must be made here, though. Even though Räsänen almost never mentions Nietzsche, many of his thoughts resemble those of the great German nihilist. They both assume that high Christology is a false depiction of Jesus of Nazareth; they propose another Jesus with a more humane face; they believe that traditional Christianity as it stands in confessions represents a violent religion that enslaves innocent human beings and threatens them with a dark eschatology; and they believe that God's divine commandments are only vain or irrational precepts that usually are used as pastors' tools for mental discrimination. Furthermore, they look for a "gay science" that could replace Christianity with mature rationalism. Cf. e.g. Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, § 135.

but he likely does not consider them as such but only as clear expressions of pure reason.

Therefore, the next conclusion concerning Räsänen's views is that he remains a materialist. His hermeneutical theory is a sociological one. His Darwinist world view is materialist. His so-called *theological* argumentation—which he himself does not want to call theological—is immanent. And his treatment of Christian doctrines is anti-theistic. For Räsänen, there is no revelation and the Bible bears no divine authority. This has been his program for four decades. This is why his treatment of the history of early Christianity must be considered immanent.

There is a tension between Räsänen's interpretation theory and his Universalist theology. The former is materialist and exploits sociological categories—and ends up with reductionism. The latter, paradoxically, is Theist. In his liberal universalism Räsänen postulates a divine Being, even though this Being has never revealed itself to human beings. As Räsänen does not ponder the epistemological question of how people can have any knowledge about this Being, one must conclude that the answer is in Kantian epistemology. This is the result of this analysis of Räsänen's thought. God is known on the basis of human *ratio*. Human understanding both of God and religion is a matter of *a priori* knowledge. As this divine Being escapes the defects of the phenomenological realm, its existence can be postulated despite the fact that, as some kind of function of the human mind, it remains a mere principle.<sup>59</sup>

As we later turn to the analysis of Räsänen's last work *Rise*, it is important to remember the results of the present chapter. In his early writings he speaks about more than the chain of interpretation. He also creates an explanation of religion itself. Already quite early in his career he has presented normative evaluations of several Christian doctrines. In addition to this, he has gradually made a detailed reconstruction of the alleged diversity of the post-Easter doctrinal spectrum. The "rise" of Christian beliefs, on these grounds, is not merely a description of the genealogy of certain beliefs. Instead, it attempts to provide an explication of a somewhat violent struggle between doctrinal convictions. It is a journey to

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<sup>59</sup> On the philosophical level this kind of reasoning is not very consistent. On the one hand, Räsänen accepts the Darwinian explanation of existence. A postulation concerning a divine Being, in that context, has little content. For Räsänen, the Old Testament God is no creator of this world. Or if he is, he remains a "God of the gaps," as atheists say. On the other hand, he simultaneously proposes the Kantian solution. In this case it is doomed to remain an escapist attempt to move theology to the realm of *a priori* knowledge.



detect the discrimination of some sincere religious views. Furthermore, it is an evaluation of the winning *Systema*, the doctrinal soteriology of the canonical Church that gradually grew into a world religion. And as regards Paul's theology, Räisänen's basic idea for explaining the development of his thought was completed already by the beginning of the 1970s. For Räisänen, Paul's contradictory writing is a result of his practical intentions. Paul met with difficult social problems, the "stubbornness" of Israel being one of the most problematic, and this galvanized him to create his poignant views both on Israel in particular and soteriology in general. This understanding also probably provides the justification for Räisänen's psychological interpretation of Paul.

### 5.6. *Contribution to Contemporary Discussion V*

Theology, for Räisänen, has always been high on the agenda. Even though he often writes about historical investigation and historical methods, he constantly addresses theological themes. This detail must be understood in the context of his more general intention. Both in his writings and in his history-of-religion project Räisänen does maintain that he will not construct theology to pander to any ecclesial needs. Instead of attempting constructive approaches to theology Räisänen has been interested in criticizing mythical views. Nevertheless, theological issues like Christology or the Trinity appear often in Räisänen's books, in one sense or another.

As noted, Räisänen often presents negations of traditional theological issues and the *loci*, namely doctrines. Even though Räisänen is not a poststructuralist deconstructionist, like Stephen Moore, he writes a kind of negative theology. This means the construction of immanent a-theology where divine features have been eliminated from the reconstruction.<sup>60</sup> In this kind of setting doctrinal statements are held to be defective. In Reimarus' words, they represent a false *Systema*. Eschatology, in the form Jesus presents it, belongs to this kind of erroneous dogmatics, as does high Christology—not to mention soteriology based on atonement. In this respect, a deconstruction of theological propositions—and I deliberately use a poststructuralist term here—is at the core of Räisänen's theological hermeneutics. It has appeared in his theory of interpretation from the very beginning of his career.

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<sup>60</sup> See discussion in chapter 4; and Moore, *Poststructuralism*, 4–6.



Critical treatment of New Testament stories, be it Bultmannian or post-structuralist, concerns language. The basic point of departure is simple. If the supernatural as such, in the Wolfenbüttelian reading, is a problem, how should one understand the so-called mythical language of the Bible? This has been a problem and, as Thiselton has noted, Bultmann has proposed at least three different definitions of myth in his writings.<sup>61</sup> Firstly, Bultmann speaks of the general primitive mythologies of different religions as well as of the mythological world view. Secondly, he defines myth as an "analogy": "It looks anthropomorphic, yet it seeks to avoid anthropomorphism." And Thiselton quotes Bultmann: "Myth is here used in the sense popularized by the 'History of Religions' School. Myth is the use of imagery (*die Vorstellungsweise*) to express the other worldly in terms of this world, the divine in terms of human life."<sup>62</sup> And thirdly, myth for Bultmann, has a "real purpose" that does not even attempt to present an objective picture of the world. According to Bultmann's de-objectifying theory, myth "expresses man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives." Therefore, myth "should be interpreted not cosmologically, but anthropologically."<sup>63</sup>

Should the theology of the incarnation or the resurrection then be understood in terms of primitive mythologies, compared for instance to the belief that stars and celestial bodies are divine? This would result in a one-dimensional understanding of religious language typical of the above-mentioned German history-of-religions school. Bultmann no doubt subscribed to such a view, as did in fact Weber and Berger, as we have seen. Räisänen is sympathetic to this approach even though he does not share all the conclusions earlier scholars made. *The Myth of God Incarnate* discussion places both Räisänen's and the British scholars' views within that movement.

In contemporary scholarship there are at least two new movements, however, that have abandoned the old standard historical-critical view. On the one hand, the new Tübingen history-of-religion school grants both Jewish religion and biblical writings an individual identity that cannot be reduced to a general religious pattern. On the other hand, the Third Quest in Jesus-studies mostly emphasizes Jesus' Jewish features and, by so doing, confirms and reinstates the conclusions of the Tübingen school.

<sup>61</sup> Thiselton, *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism*, s.v. Bultmann; Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 170–172.

<sup>62</sup> Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 171. See Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 10 fn. 2.

<sup>63</sup> Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 170–171.

The second alternative was that of an analogy. Some scholars link it with the history-of-religion school and some see it as a more general approach to religious language. Could it be understood as a solution? If mythical language is seen directly as an analogy this would result in what we have treated above as a Hegelian interpretation of religious language. The linguistic and semantic *Vorstellung* represents the transcendent *Begriff*, the divine content that in itself is considered real. Thielićke, one of Bultmann's early critics, has noted that all religious language must be human language because that is all we have. In this respect Bultmann's claim is self-evident.<sup>64</sup> Religious language is always about analogies. Be it Hegelian or structuralist, religious language can be treated as metaphorical language. In that case the interesting question is what kind of realities do metaphors represent. We must remember that truth, even in academic discussion, is never just a matter of simple objects like hammers but also about relations, causalities or power. Religious truth is mostly about people's relation to God, their future destiny, and divine power.<sup>65</sup>

Räisänen does not think that myth can be interpreted analogically. In this respect Thiselton's criticism is useful as it helps one define also Räisänen's views. The latter obviously chooses the first alternative treated above. According to the materialist view, myth is only a false reading. It belongs to the pre-scientific understanding of reality. This is the standard view of the Comtean-Weberian interpretation of cultural evolution.

Thiselton's severe critique of Bultmann, however, concerns the fact that the latter's definitions of myth are inconsistent. For Bultmann, myth is not about analogy. This is also what the present analysis confirms. Bultmann claims that biblical religious language in itself is de-objectifying language. He is convinced that theological or mythical language expresses human self-understanding. This is the basic reason why the religious language of the Bible, according to Bultmann, should be interpreted existentially and anthropologically. This is the whole point of his existentialist interpretation. And as we have noted in the analysis, at this phase Bultmann categorically denies the possibility of analogy. Instead, he states that linguistic signs do not and cannot represent the kerygma. Kerygma just cannot be put into words. When attempted, the results is always distortion and even perversion of the religious ideal—and this precisely is the world of myths.

One of the present study's results is that this is one of the reasons Räisänen abandons Bultmann's hermeneutics. Räisänen does not yet use

<sup>64</sup> See especially Thielićke, reprinted in: Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 170–172.

<sup>65</sup> We shall return to the treatment of metaphoric language later.

the linguistic argument but he considers Bultmann's theory inconsistent. Bultmann has adopted too many immanent premises in order to maintain any metaphysical aims. There is no room left for the kerygma in the hermeneutical system. This can be seen as the reason why Räisänen criticizes Bultmann's solutions and demands de-kerygmaticizing.

Therefore, one is justified in saying that the treatment of so-called mythical language is today in a completely new situation. The old view advocating for the abandonment of primitive mythology has little relevance for New Testament studies. Furthermore, Bultmann's existentialism has mostly been forgotten—and it faces difficulties even in principle due to the inconsistency in his theory. Interest today lies primarily in the new treatment of religious language and religious metaphors.

Furthermore, contemporary scholarship finds itself in a new situation because the present scholarly community has seen the rebirth of New Testament theology. The field that had become a playground for anthropology after Bultmann and been adapted into humanist philosophy by his followers like Käsemann—and saw no new monographs on New Testament theology for three decades—gradually grew into a fruitful area of innovation. Dogmatic categories have returned to scholarly books and theology seeks substance.<sup>66</sup>

Soteriology, Christology, and eschatology are admissible issues in biblical studies today. Reasons for this are the same as for other issues after the 1990s: the post-liberal movement and the linguistic turn in theology. Critical assessment of secularization has led many scholars to believe that theology in the proper sense of the word, speaking about Christ and his work, atonement and resurrection, need not and must not be reduced merely to social factors of human community. Theological issues have substance in themselves, and they can be treated as meaningful subjects in academic discussion.<sup>67</sup>

Many scholars accept New Testament statements about sin, as these speak of estrangement and alienation from other people. Through public discussion and the media, we see that evil is a reality. In its various forms it is the most difficult problem facing humanity. Philosophers, teachers, doctors, and novelists alike constantly elaborate on the expressions of inhumane evil among people. In such a context, biblical theology that

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<sup>66</sup> Such a change will become evident as we later investigate New Testament theology in chapter 6.

<sup>67</sup> It has been one of the key arguments in the present work: that post-liberal change has provided completely new hermeneutical tools for New Testament theology. See the discussion later in chapter 7.

speaks of reconciliation, forgiveness and renewal is relevant. Christology and soteriology are issues that are welcomed in present society, no longer rejected as remnants of religious violence or oppression.

Räisänen's theological stance still belongs to the Bultmannian/Heideggerian tradition at least in the sense that it rewrites but includes a Nietzschean antagonism towards Christian doctrine. Even though Räisänen rarely asserts a full-blown death-of-God theology in a nihilist sense, his treatment of traditional dogmas reveals that he holds early Christian beliefs and orthodoxy to be unhealthy for the modern human being. Should there be a God behind this world of Hitler and Hiroshima, he cannot be an omnipotent, good God. For Räisänen, the Christian church depends on the same horrifying conditions of human life as any group attempting to find reason behind the chaotic reality of this world.

For Räisänen, the problem of theodicy is one of the major issues that force him to change his theology and concept of God. This, of course, is also a central issue in Weberian sociology of religion. In this sense, Räisänen's own work is part of "religion." He has been bold in his writing but as a scholar he must face the actual question: Who is responsible for all the evil? The precise nature of the chaotic world is never explicated in Räisänen's works in detail. He has this in common with several non-Christian ideologues. How should the genesis of this violent and militant world be explained? The first observation in this discussion concerns the relevance of biblical theology. Theology has taken the explication of precisely these problems as one of its primary goals.

Theology after Reimarus has constantly discussed what proper world view is, and Räisänen follows suit. Therefore, he is forced to answer certain ideological questions that his theology raises. Is the immanent solution really consistent? If one cannot assume a creation in the traditional theological sense, how did this world become what it appears to be? Räisänen evidently supports the Darwinian alternative according to which the world develops through power-struggles and survival. At least he refers to Darwin in his writings. Despite this he never discusses the ideological problems of the Darwinist view. If violence is the productive force of development, why should it be questioned? Failure to treat this problem is a major flaw in Räisänen's post-Christian ideology.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Scholars today do not appear to be very conscious of their ideological or philosophical commitments—at least apart from the poststructuralist movement. In this respect Bultmann's time was different. The answer, to my esteem, can also here be found in the Weberian metanarrative: scholars working in the age of reason no longer think that their

Räisänen's examples are historic but he does not elaborate much on them: Hitler, Hiroshima and the like. His treatment of the problem of theodicy is insufficient. It is true that in a Darwinian world view suffering is a reality that one faces here and there. If, according to Räisänen, this world is a place that God has wanted and even created—but where no Fall has taken place—our concept of God will of necessity be overturned. God's world disintegrates into a sad place. God himself turns into a heavenly monster—just as atheist propaganda has always claimed. Is this what Räisänen promotes in his a-theology? Probably not.

What happens to Räisänen's reasoning if all his Darwinian premises are taken at their face value? According to the rationalist and materialist interpretation, we live in a cold and cruel world. It is inappropriate for a rationalist theologian to speak of an omnipotent God. All they can say is that this natural world happens to be what it is due to a long evolution and chance. Who in this case is responsible for the evil? It cannot be God because, according to these premises, he is unable to influence the course of evolution or the civilization of humankind. There is no one else to accuse but human beings. Hitler and Hiroshima are the creation of men (less of women).

Räisänen takes part in the post-War discussion on theodicy, trying to make sense of the horrors in Europe. The Christian church was unable to prevent the holocaust. But neither did the materialist revolution of the moderns help people find happiness in an idealist ethical community. Instead, it created a monster who used all the technical advances one can imagine for destruction. Therefore, all that human beings can do in such a jungle is to rebel against the (Darwinian) conditions of life. Like all naturalists, Räisänen has no real ground for granting exceptional value to the human race—he just has to postulate it. Reasons for this remain undiscussed in his writings.<sup>69</sup>

Nevertheless, Räisänen relies on high ethical values. The church as a natural community of aggressive human beings is a battlefield where the orthodox interpretation of the New Testament supports a religious power-struggle. Orthodox Protestant Christianity, as it stands, is in Räisänen's view a violent community that suppresses freedom of thought and any good, novel ideas of innocent thinkers. A church clinging to orthodoxy

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rationalist view on religion would be dependent on any world-view. For them, it is just a matter of pure or sane reason.

<sup>69</sup> This discussion took place in the sphere of the death-of-God movement (see 4.3.), but atheists use similar arguments.

just participates in the mental oppression that represents the destructive forces of life. Therefore, universalist liberalism must do better. It must aim at a complete reinterpretation of the New Testament. In this respect, Räsänen has learned from Kant after all.

And this is what Räsänen has attempted to do. For him, there is neither revelation nor incarnation. God has sent us nothing. God, if there is a heavenly “person” or divine being at all, does not speak. There is no atonement. While Jesus clearly suffered, he is merely an example of human suffering, a brother to those who will later suffer in this imperfect world. This is the conclusion Harnack reached. The practical consequences follow similar principles. There is no true confession. One cannot expect that God would ever touch the agony of this world. There is no resurrection, no divine judgment, and no life in a heavenly paradise. Christian doctrine as it stands is, for Räsänen, just an illusion.

In this respect, Räsänen’s theology is close to some death-of-God writers, such as Taylor and Raschke. A deconstruction of the old *Systema* is never a neutral, sociological enterprise. Instead, it is a project that has ideological commitments. The detecting of these commitments is an essential part of the analysis of such movements. As regards Räsänen one can say that, even before writing his *Rise*, he has thus taken a severe stance against traditional Christian doctrine. Such a view is destined to influence his treatment of the alleged history of early Christian religion.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE DEBATE OVER NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

Räisänen has a history of raising conflicts. His style is often provocative and many scholars and ministers have reacted to his proposals as to attacks. Already his dissertation on Mary startled Finnish scholarship, which had not yet agreed on how to use the new historical-critical methods in Gospel studies. Later his article *Authority* provoked a heated discussion over biblical inspiration. *Paul and the Law*, in turn, compelled dozens of Pauline scholars to write responses to his claims. Finally, in *Beyond New Testament Theology* (1990), Räisänen revitalized the Wredean history-of-religion theory that questions the very writing of traditional New Testament theology. At least for Räisänen himself, the project is changed. An intense debate over New Testament theology followed and has continued to the present day. The question about New Testament theology is probably the most important in the treatment of Räisänen's hermeneutics. How does Räisänen's theory on the emergence of early Christianity relate to the numerous monographs that have been published in recent years? How should one write New Testament theology?<sup>1</sup>

#### 6.1. *Reading Gabler*

For a long time, during the twentieth century, New Testament theology was a somewhat neglected field of study.<sup>2</sup> There are several reasons

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<sup>1</sup> *Paul and the Law* was published in 1986, and the first articles that were later translated and completed as parts of *Beyond New Testament Theology* were published in Finnish in 1987 and 1988. Räisänen's project with New Testament theology thus started right after his Pauline studies. See for instance Räisänen, *TAik* 92 (1987) 377–390; Räisänen *TAik* 93 (1988) 317–331.

<sup>2</sup> Still in 1992 Robert Morgan in his *ABD* article assumes that the days of textbooks in New Testament theology are over. "Increased specialization even within NT scholarship has rendered the old textbook format of NTT questionable. It has become less likely that one scholar's summary of his or her exegetical conclusions will excite the interest that Holtzmann's did." Morgan, *ABD* VI (1992) 483. At that time no one could anticipate that the next two decades would see almost forty new monographs on New Testament theology. Cf. also Reumann referring to Collins' expression: "In America, it has long been common opinion that 'Biblical theology is a subject in decline.'" Reumann, *Aufgabe*, 73; but he remarks that his own view has been more optimistic.

for this. One only needs to read Albert Schweitzer's comments on the quest for the historical Jesus in order to remember how Jesus, during the preceding century, had been excluded from the study of theological issues.<sup>3</sup> It is only logical that in such a situation no unified presentation starting with Jesus' message and focusing then on Paul and the apostolic letters could be expected to appear. Historical-critical scholarship was not very interested in constructions but prioritized partial reconstructions. Its adherents attempted to dissolve even those seemingly unified compositions that one would find in texts and their narratives. Existentialism then completed the picture and separated meaning from texts. Scholars writing on New Testament theology or biblical theology would often be treated as pre-scientific conservatives or even biblical fundamentalists.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, biblical theology had always been there. The term itself is old. Johann P. Gabler, of course, established its use when he posited it as a counterpoint to dogmatic theology. As a historical task, in Gabler's opinion, biblical theology was partly working in the same field as the emerging historical investigation of the Bible. The exact nature of Gabler's theory remains to be seen later. The historical-critical reception of his approach started to create problems and, by the end of the nineteenth century, historical investigation had mostly made the construction of biblical theology impossible.<sup>5</sup>

The discussion on the subject may sometimes be somewhat confused, though, because in the United States, especially after the Second World War, biblical theology also became a title for an entire movement.<sup>6</sup> Several scholars began to oppose liberal theology under this kind of rubric. In the United States around 1940–1960, thus, biblical theology represented a view that put emphasis on the unity of the Bible and even its distinctive Hebrew way of thinking and expressing religious issues. It severely opposed both liberal theology and secular philosophy. As the Biblical

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<sup>3</sup> Schweitzer, *The Quest*, 398. The investigation of biblical theology has always been closely connected with or influenced by the study of the historical Jesus.

<sup>4</sup> As we have noted before, and as Kümmel's *Investigation* shows, twentieth century Protestant New Testament scholarship was interested in sources and especially the genesis of the Gospel tradition. Interest in the "background" surpassed interest in the texts themselves.

<sup>5</sup> Gabler's ideas will be treated in detail below. For a general overview, see Reventlow, *ABD VI* (1992) 485.

<sup>6</sup> For the history of biblical theology, see e.g. Betz, *IDB 1* (1962) 432–437; Reventlow, *ABD VI* (1992) 485–490; Barr, *IDBSupp* (1976) 104–106; Scobie, *TyndB 42* (1991) 31–61; and the monograph by Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. On the earlier phase, see also Kraus, *Die biblische Theologie, ihre Geschichte und Problematik*.



Theology Movement gradually became outmoded, so did the production of monographs on New Testament theology cease. All in all, “biblical theology,” as a term, does not in itself imply any dependence on historical investigation or the historical-critical method—as some scholars assume it should.

In post-war Germany, the field of New Testament theology was dominated by Bultmann’s colossal monograph. It can be seen as a summary and climax of the continental historical-critical work as well as of the history-of-religions approach. As we have noted, this put demythologizing in action and used practically all the liberal deconstructions of New Testament texts one could think of. As regards hermeneutics, its Heideggerian existentialism shifted the treatment of theology to anthropology and changed the object of theology completely. Bultmann’s work was so influential that, for several decades, hardly any independent monographs on New Testament theology were written at all.

Today the situation has completely changed. The study of New Testament theology blossoms on every continent. During the two last decades we have seen more than thirty new monographs on the issue. It is true that, after Bultmann, not many scholars dared to challenge his views or attempt an individual project on the subject. In our time the vacuum is being filled, and we find monographs that exceed a thousand pages. If scholars’ trust in New Testament theology vanished for a time, it has now revived with a vengeance.<sup>7</sup>

There are several ways to classify and group different monographs on New Testament theology. In the beginning of the twentieth century, approaches changed from doctrinal presentations to rationalist overviews. According to the former, New Testament theology was a connecting force between biblical scholarship and dogmatics. The latter, however, assumed that the message of the New Testament could be reduced to ideological or pragmatic principles. Scholars in the 1980s usually classified different approaches by a trichotomy that also Räisänen uses: (1) dogmatic, (2) idealistic, (3) history-of-religion. New Testament theologies were assessed in

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<sup>7</sup> There are several overviews on recent literature, see Hasel, “Recent Models of Biblical Theology: Three Major Perspectives.” *Andrews University Studies* 33 (1995); Carson, “Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective.” *BBR* 5 (1995); Via, *What Is New Testament Theology?*; Matera, “New Testament Theology: History, Method, and Identity.” *CBQ* 67 (2005) 1–21; Rowe, “New Testament Theology: The Revival of a Discipline.” *JBL* 125 (2006) 393–419; and for Räisänen himself, see “What’s Happening in New Testament Theology?” in *Lux Humana, Lux Aeterna*, 439–457. For a thorough presentation of the literature, also in the German speaking world, see Frey, *Aufgabe*, 3–6.

terms of their view about the nature of belief.<sup>8</sup> It is probably not coincidental that these three categories correspond to the three Weberian phases of cultural development. Räisänen assumes that the final history-of-religion approach is a perfect sociological treatment of New Testament ideas. In this respect the sociological interpretation has directed even the categorization of New Testament theology.

During the last three decades classifications have also changed. This makes the grouping of the works even more difficult. After the linguistic turn in textual studies new methods have appeared. It is a matter of opinion how precisely these methods should be taken into account when assessing New Testament theology. If one wants to pay attention to the nature of the approaches themselves, one could use the classification (1) doctrinal, (2) idealistic, (3) existentialist, (4) canonical, (5) sociological (i.e. history-of-religion), and (6) narratological.

Early Protestant presentations of New Testament theology were clearly dogmatic. Authors attempted to define and classify doctrinal statements in the texts and to create a meaningful system for these dogmata. This is not bygone history, though: even some of the recent monographs on New Testament theology still use this method. Throughout the history of such study, approaches periodically changed and especially so under the influence of the Enlightenment. Rationalism emphasized the unique capabilities of reason, which is why it wanted to do away with doctrines. Therefore, theology too needed to be defined in a new way. This is where Gabler enters onto the stage.

Of all the scholars under discussion, Gabler needs to be placed most carefully in context. His theory has been hailed as the “declaration of independence from ‘biblical theology’,” (Räisänen) and “the birth-hour of modern New Testament theology,” (Morgan) just because of its alleged emphasis on the historical aspect of the process.<sup>9</sup> Gabler’s actual work, however, has often been neglected in the discussion and, as Smend and Ollenburger have remarked, “the title of Gabler’s address has been far more influential than its content.”<sup>10</sup> Gabler, who called himself a “Christian rationalist,” was destined to stand between the old world and an anti-theological materialism that attempted to deprive Christianity of its message.

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<sup>8</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 3–5.

<sup>9</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 3; for the discussion, see Adam, *Making Sense*, 50.

<sup>10</sup> Ollenburger, *Understanding the Word*, 42.

Gabler gave his crucial *Antrittsrede*, the inaugural address “On the Proper Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology and the Specific Objectives of Each” at the University of Altdorf in 1787, just a couple of years before the outbreak of the French Revolution.<sup>11</sup> In Europe, this was the age of reason, and every theologian had to face the intellectual conflict that governed the academic world. Gabler had had to develop his ideas amidst the tension between Protestant orthodoxy and radical rationalism. In many respects, he was himself an heir of German rationalism along with his contemporary Semler, who had earlier suggested a distinction between exegesis (*Auslegung*) and interpretation (*Erklärung*). Gabler wished to go further, and this makes his theory rather special.

Gabler’s most famous distinction concerns biblical theology and dogmatic theology. This dichotomy is also the starting point for getting acquainted with his ideas even though the exact nature of his theory is not self-evident. There are several contradictory interpretations of his thinking, and these will be dealt with below issue by issue.

There is truly a biblical theology, of historical origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matter; on the other hand there is a dogmatic theology of didactic origin, teaching what each theologian philosophises rationally about divine things, according to the measure of his ability or of the times, age, place, sect, school, and other similar factors.<sup>12</sup>

Gabler does present a strict dichotomy but neither does he simply rewrite the double program of exegesis and interpretation. In his understanding biblical theology itself implies that “we distinguish carefully the divine from the human.” The separation of time-bound material from universally valid ideas is the main task of the “historical” biblical theology. This should not be confused with the distinction between biblical theology and dogmatic theology.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See English translation in Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, *SJT* 33 (1980) 133–158. The German text is provided by Merk, *Biblische Theologie*, 273–284.

<sup>12</sup> Gabler’s own text in Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, *SJT* 33 (1980) 137. Stuckenbruck is probably right in pointing out that Gabler’s original expression “*e genere historico*” means “historical in origin” rather than “historical character” as it has sometimes been translated, and in this respect the translation above is correct. Gabler apparently means that his analysis begins by determining the historical meaning of the text. Stuckenbruck, *SJT* 52 (1999) 142–143. The counterpoint here, naturally, is the claim that Gabler had spoken of a one-sided historical nature of biblical theology, and this has proven to be a false reading as such.

<sup>13</sup> See Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, *SJT* 33 (1980) 138.

Therefore, the identification of these two areas should not proceed too hastily. What is distinctive in Gabler's own effort is his three-stage treatment of New Testament material for biblical theology.<sup>14</sup> According to Gabler, biblical theology starts with historical investigation, but this is just the pragmatic part of the process. Scholars must first attend to the individual documents of the New Testament (or the Old Testament), "gather carefully the sacred ideas," and describe different texts' linguistic and historical settings. This is a typically historical approach, and, therefore, this feature was later welcomed in the historical-critical movement.<sup>15</sup>

The second stage (Teil) is as important as the first, though. Gabler states that it is based on comparison and concerns the classification of elements that rise above historical particulars. The direction is towards the general and universal. He means ideas that various authors in the Bible held in common. As Adam remarks, this stage involves "reordering the results of the initial survey in such a way as will form a single, unified system."<sup>16</sup>

The next move, however, is more often than not forgotten, at least in the Wredean tradition and in the current that Stendahl started, as we shall see a little later. Gabler was confident, namely, that the comparison made in the second phase leads directly to the next level where "each single opinion must be examined for its universal ideas." This is a level where scholars can reach the "undoubted universal ideas," and where "the unchanging idea of the doctrine of salvation" can be ascertained. Furthermore, this work serves as foundation for a "pure" biblical theology: "then finally there will be the happy appearance of biblical theology, pure and unmixed with foreign things."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This is noteworthy because some scholars emphasize just the dichotomy between biblical theology and dogmatic theology, or the difference between "Auslegung" and "Erklärung." As Stuckenbruck has noted, the special feature of Gabler's theory is in the three stages of analysis that concern biblical theology itself—apart from the above-mentioned dichotomies. Stuckenbruck, *SJT* 52 (1999) 144. Some scholars speak about two stages, and it is a matter of preference how one classifies these. Gabler himself does not provide a clear picture: he starts with the "first task," then speaks of "the other part [Teil] of the task," and finally moves on just by saying "then." Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, *SJT* 33 (1980) 138–141.

<sup>15</sup> Gabler in Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, *SJT* 33 (1980) 138–139; see also Stuckenbruck, *SJT* 52 (1999) 144–145. One should note that Gabler's "historical" task does not mean simply a historical-critical treatment of the text but, instead, concerns "sacred ideas."

<sup>16</sup> Adam, *Making Sense*, 54. Frey also notes that Gabler's theory has this double nature (doppelte Biblische Theologie). Frey, *Aufgabe*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, *SJT* 33 (1980) 142–243. In this description, I follow Stuckenbruck, *SJT* 52 (1999) 145.

Such an “atemporal theology” constitutes “biblical theology in the stricter sense of the word.”<sup>18</sup> A similar view can be found also elsewhere in Gabler’s writings, as Ollenburger’s overview shows:

According to Gabler, “. . . the divine” is not to be sought “in the particular, the specific, or the local aspects of Jesus’ words and those of the apostles, but in the universal; and a dogmatics which rests only on the results of grammatical-historical exegesis will not satisfy a philosophizing theologian.”<sup>19</sup>

These quotations prove that there is Kantian influence in Gabler’s theory even though he does not accept Kant’s view of religion as such. According to Gabler, valid theological propositions are abstract and universal, and they must be detected and selected by reason alone. Against the generally accepted view popular in later scholarship (after Stendahl), Gabler appears to oppose the idea that history and historical study as such could provide material for biblical theology. History, in his treatment, means something that it no longer means later. For Gabler, the historical is always local and particular. The task of biblical theology, however, is to “distinguish that which is universally true, the *notiones universae*, from that which is merely temporal.”<sup>20</sup> In the true spirit of the Enlightenment, Gabler believes that human reason can “rise above the problem of particularity” and find what is universal in religion.<sup>21</sup>

There might also be a problem regarding Kant, because he did oppose biblical theology not based on pure reason alone. Kant demanded that the understanding of the nature of religion be based on philosophy, whereas Gabler shifted the role of philosophy to dogmatic theology. Kant also rejected the idea of divine revelation because this would weaken the role of reason.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Gabler had adopted Kant’s rationalist idealism in many respects. According to Gabler, theological “concepts” need to be “pure,” they must be coined and explained by reason alone. Furthermore, as

<sup>18</sup> So Adam, *Making Sense*, 55, referring to Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, *SJT* 33 (1980) 144.

<sup>19</sup> Ollenburger’s construction, Ollenburger, *Understanding the Word*, 43; referring to Gabler’s reviews on certain contemporary books on hermeneutics; for the original text see Merk, *Biblische Theologie*, 96.

<sup>20</sup> So Ollenburger, *Understanding the Word*, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Stuckenbruck, *SJT* 52 (1999) 145. Fowl, in turn, states that with Gabler’s theory, “Kant’s view won the day.” Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Ollenburger is right in noting the differences but these must not be given too much weight. Ollenburger, *Understanding the Word*, 44. For a good analysis of the problem, see Merk, *Biblische Theologie*, 58–69. As Turner and Green remark, Kant’s influence can be seen in the belief that the subjective mind “does not merely ‘perceive,’” but it actually “shapes and organizes the world it encounters.” Turner and Green, *Between Two Horizons*, 6.

universally true concepts, they must have an eternal flavor, divine clarity, and they must be sublime. Even though God, for Gabler, was a person and not merely an idea, his hermeneutics is based completely on Kantian epistemology.

All this makes Gabler a dualist. His rationalism is, more or less, Reimarian rationalism. Gabler parallels another scholar of his own time Johann G. Eichhorn, both of them learning from the history-of-religion approach suggested by Christoph G. Heyne. Biblical myth, according to these rationalists, must be interpreted historically and critically.<sup>23</sup> Gabler, however, stood against radical rationalism (supported for instance by Lessing) and wished to find “basic truths” behind the mythical expressions of the Bible.<sup>24</sup> In this respect Gabler is one of the first to make an apologetic move against radical rationalism and attempt to save Christian theology by focusing on the universal truths of biblical theology. While it might be slightly surprising to some of his commentators, Gabler in fact starts the apologetic tradition where the Bible’s alleged mythical presentation is given a meaning that is no longer dependent on the semantic content of the expression. The meaning of a text is separated from its content. This kind of dualist hermeneutics was later developed by Strauss, and it found its climax in Bultmann’s existentialist interpretation.

It is this atemporal and dehistoricized biblical theology that provides the basis for Gabler’s dogmatic theology. Gabler believes that dogmatic theology is defective because it is subjected to constant change: it is “*philosophia christiana*,” and so it varies “according to the variety both of philosophy and of every human point of view.” But in contrast to that “biblical theology itself remains the same.” Dogmatic theology, therefore, can only be built on the unchanging foundation of pure biblical theology.<sup>25</sup>

However, Gabler’s assumption that it is possible to extract from the Bible *dicta classica* (that is, timeless universal truths agreeing with reason; i.e. a “biblical theology, narrowly construed”), which might form a solid foundation

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<sup>23</sup> “Though he agreed with rationalists that miraculous events recounted in the Bible did not in fact occur.” Stuckenbruck, *SJT* 52 (1999) 151. For the treatment of myth in Gabler’s time, see Merk, *Biblische Theologie*, 54–58.

<sup>24</sup> Stuckenbruck, *SJT* 52 (1999) 152, esp. p. 148: “In the procedure of distilling and apprehending timeless truths from Scripture the task of biblical theology for Gabler is primarily historical. Ironically, however, linguistic and historical-critical exegesis ends up playing a largely negative role.” Cf. Ollenburger, *Understanding the Word*, 40–43.

<sup>25</sup> Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, *SJT* 33 (1980) 144.

for the didactic mission of (more subjective and time-bound) dogmatic theology, was itself a product of Enlightenment thought.<sup>26</sup>

In opposition to the historical-critical view on Gabler and his dichotomy, thus, more recent scholarship has paid attention to the atemporal nature of his biblical theology. Many adherents of the earlier movement did cherish Gabler's "historical" approach because it appears to enable a purely historical treatment of biblical theology in the situation where dogmatic intentions had too long governed the field and hindered the development of purely historical approaches. The analysis proves, however, that Gabler's pure biblical theology is ambiguous about the role of historical investigation. What is essential is the universal nature of pure biblical theology, the extraordinary result of the work of pure reason that—as Gabler believes—is able to extract the *dicta classica* from the Bible, or rather, the *notiones universae* that constitute biblical theology.<sup>27</sup>

All this would be simple enough, at least in the present stage of investigation, had Räsänen not provided an individual interpretation of Gabler's original dichotomy in terms of his own understanding of "historical" biblical theology. Both in his Finnish 1988 article and in the *Beyond*, namely, Räsänen introduces still another dichotomy, inspired probably by Gabler's attempt to "distinguish carefully the divine from the human." Räsänen suggests that Gabler's main contribution to the investigation of biblical theology is in the distinction between "historical" and "normative" biblical theology.

It is Gabler's merit to have distinguished, at least in principle, between historical and normative "biblical theology"; his own words for that distinction are "true" and "pure" biblical theology respectively. Both theologies are needed, but they are not to be mixed up; they belong to different stages in the work.<sup>28</sup>

Räsänen, following Boers, was "tempted" to use this pair of terms in his own theory, which he did in the Finnish articles on which his *Beyond* is based. In the footnote discussion in the *Beyond*, however, Räsänen states that he has abandoned such a dichotomy since Morgan pointed out that "the preservation of Gabler's terminology does not make for clarity in the

<sup>26</sup> Reventlow, *ABD VI* (1992) 485.

<sup>27</sup> Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, *SJT* 33 (1980) 143.

<sup>28</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, 5. In the same context he refers to Gabler's distinction "between time-bound and timeless material," see p. 4. It is worth noting that the pair of words Räsänen refers to cannot be found in Gabler's *Antrittsrede*.



present situation.”<sup>29</sup> He means that he does classify Gabler’s ideas by that dichotomy but he himself no longer accepts it. The harm is already done, though. Räisänen has made Gabler’s original “historical” biblical theology an oppositional method to “normative” biblical theology. This dichotomy, deriving probably from Stendahl as we shall see, essentially changes the reading of Gabler’s theory. It creates a new interpretation of the historical task and makes Gabler look like Wrede in his history-of-religion approach. It is understandable since this serves Räisänen’s own designs but, as a reading of history, it distorts Gabler’s original idea and makes theological interpretation look like dogmatic theology. This is how Räisänen ends up with the opposite of what Gabler originally meant.<sup>30</sup>

All in all, Gabler belongs to the first scholars who investigated the relation between biblical criticism and dogmatics and tried to find tools for a meaningful dialogue between them. It was only Hegelian idealism that later changed the situation, with his philosophical dialectics making timeless truths the very ideal of doctrine. The key scholar here is David Strauss who, as the main writer in the liberal tradition in the nineteenth century, developed this method and earned the title “Hegel’s best pupil.” When the historical study of the Gospels had lost contact with the historical Jesus and his teaching, the doctrinal teaching of the apostles was classified according to Hegelian principles.<sup>31</sup>

Such a background makes it necessary to assess the influence of Hegelian phenomenology on biblical interpretation once more. Gabler had already applied rationalist idealism in his dualist hermeneutics. In the Kantian context universal truths were considered mental categories that were necessarily and universally true and, therefore, detectable by pure reason. Thanks to Hegelian phenomenology, views on ontology changed. Divine

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<sup>29</sup> See Räisänen, *Beyond*, 157, fn. 9. “Boers 1979 uses Gabler’s evocative pair of terms. I was tempted to follow his lead (and actually did so both in the Finnish articles on which this book is based and in its penultimate draft). However, I am grateful to Robert Morgan for pointing out that the preservation of Gabler’s terminology does not make for clarity in the present situation.” Cf. Räisänen, *TAik* 93 (1988) 319. See Boers, *Theology*, 35–36.

<sup>30</sup> Penner notes that since Gabler must be placed in his natural historical context, this alters one’s understanding of Gabler’s intentions: “In terms of how Gabler conceptualised the relationship between the two types of “theology” (true biblical and pure biblical theologies), Bultmann’s *Sachkritik* likely comes closest to realising this enterprise in the history of scholarship. Admittedly, this assessment of the realization of Gabler’s program goes against Räisänen’s view on the matter, but I think that is largely because Räisänen interprets the discussion through the lens of *Religionswissenschaft*, which is not where I think Gabler can be situated.” Penner, *Moving Beyond*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Kümmel, *Investigation*, 120; Berger, *Exegese und Philosophie*, 53–55.



revelation was now understood in terms of a dialectic between a heavenly concept (*Begriff*) and its vague earthly representations (*Vorstellung*). This dichotomy started to direct many different patterns of interpretation. Strauss interpreted defective Gospel stories as “true” expressions of some kind of heavenly *Begriffe*.

A somewhat erroneous reading of Hegel’s phenomenology resulted in a hermeneutics where fictitious or mythical descriptions were explained as expressions of a heavenly ideal, a universal concept that was believed to justify all different mundane or prosaic expressions.<sup>32</sup> This was naturally a clever way to solve the historical problem that rationalism had created but in theology, it could not provide a contribution as significant as Deism, for example. The “theology” of the New Testament *Vorstellungen* no longer had substance. Like in Strauss’ hermeneutics, biblical theology was reduced to a selection of human ideals. What is surprising is that the final outcome of Strauss’ Hegelian hermeneutics differs little from Gabler’s original biblical theology.<sup>33</sup>

Later Wilhelm Herrmann and Adolf von Harnack (1900) shifted the weight towards Kant—and now in the truly Kantian form that Gabler had never accepted. Theory was weighted towards an ethical universal religion of pure reason. The silent influence of Marburger neo-Kantians in the study of New Testament theology was immense. The approach has often been called historical-critical even though it has no direct relation to particular methods themselves. The common point of departure apparently justifies the title. The aim of the study was to find Jesus’ timeless teaching behind the mythical stories of the Gospels.

The shift to German neo-Kantian (or: *Neuprotestantismus*) hermeneutics had demanded a significant philosophical change that gradually moved towards the disparaging of metaphysics. There are three main currents that profoundly affect New Testament studies later. The first concerns the influence of Hermann Lotze and the reception of his philosophy in Albrecht Ritschl’s neo-Kantian theology. Lotze wished to replace

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<sup>32</sup> As Courth remarks, Strauss borrowed terminology from Hegelian ontology and transferred it to epistemology. This is how Gospel stories as mere “forms” (*Vorstellung*) were separated from the *Begriff*. Hegel still believed that the former represents the latter. Courth, *Leben Jesu*, 77. Müller, in turn, holds that Strauss confused the Hegelian concepts of dialectics and empiricism. Hence myth was given merely an immanent explanation. Müller, *Identität*, 256–258.

<sup>33</sup> Berger notes that Strauss changed from dialectics to dualism when treating idea (*Begriff*) and form (*Vorstellung*). Berger, *Exegese und Philosophie*, 55. Cf. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 402.

traditional metaphysics with a new “effective” ontology. It stressed influence and response. Lotze focused on psychology (dependence on tradition), aesthetic experience, and ethics. Ritschl developed these ideas and attempted to free theology from “falsche Metaphysik” (false metaphysics). Religion, for him, was a matter of Christianity’s impact (Wirkung) on one’s soul.<sup>34</sup>

Ritschl—and later Bultmann—was connected with the Marburger neo-Kantians who, under Natorp and the theologian Herrmann developed the hermeneutics of personal experience. Ontological and theological statements were now dismissed, their historical value having been questioned by the liberal movement. This is why theology, in this second wave, was grounded on one’s inner experience. For Herrmann, the core of Christian faith was in personal experience (Erlebnis) that would be realized in one’s *Selbstgefühl*, meaning the personal feeling and experience of the ethical norm that makes one also spontaneously value oneself.<sup>35</sup>

Third, one must mention the important influence of Jacob Fries on Wilhelm Bousset. Fries had supported the immanent interpretation of history as well as focused on the development of ideas. These principles found a new expression later in Troeltsch’s view of history, all of which Bousset used to build his understanding of the early history of religion. So the immanent interpretation of religion found its way into the history-of-religion movement.<sup>36</sup>

These approaches differ from each other, naturally, but there are also factors that unite them. They are all very “Kantian” and tend to criticize traditional metaphysics. What is essentially new for hermeneutics is that, unlike Gabler, these scholars no longer believed that a true hermeneutical method could extract universal truths from the Scriptures. Instead, they highlight inner experience and the impact of the Bible or New Testament personalities. *Das Ding-an-sich* cannot be attained and, therefore, all one has are phenomena and impressions. No statement about transcendental reality, according to this view, can be true. All theological hermeneutics can investigate is the “effect” tradition has on contemporary readers.

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<sup>34</sup> The investigation of Lotze’s impact on neo-Protestant theology is one of the key issues in Finnish systematic theology, and I refer to works such as Ruokanen, *Hermeneutica moderna*, 62–63; Saarinen, *Gottes Wirken*, 8–22.

<sup>35</sup> See above in 3.1. The neo-Kantian movement has also been studied in Finnish scholarship. I refer especially to Martikainen, *Uskonto arvoelämyksenä*, 46, 86, 162. I have treated this subject in my monograph on hermeneutics, Eskola, *Uuden testamentin hermeneutiikka*, 26–28.

<sup>36</sup> See the detailed analysis in Berger, *Exegese und Philosophie*, 88–89, 114–119.

This produces a coherent idea of a history of influence, a principle that Räsänen likes to use in his hermeneutics.

Harnack, the heir of the Marburger neo-Kantian movement, applied such traditions in his interpretation of Christian theology. For Harnack, theology had to be based on the moral teaching of Jesus' idea of a "religion of the Father." Harnack was convinced that the New Testament teaches Jesus' program of brotherly love and the command on which it is based: the command to love one's neighbor. This was well in line with Kant's categorical imperative in ethics. This view in liberal Protestant New Testament theology changed only after Bultmann entered the picture with his existentialist theology—even though his hermeneutics still bears both the marks of Hegelian idealism and Kantian ethics.<sup>37</sup>

As one might expect, early New Testament theologies of the nineteenth century were written in the liberal theological tradition. Reventlow's survey shows how, for instance, Bernhard Weiss and Willibald Beyschlag wrote their works along the lines Strauss and other Jesus-scholars had suggested. Towards the end of the century, then, Gustav Krüger and William Wrede introduced the history-of-religions approach—praised later by Räsänen—and German New Testament theologies started to adopt such ideas. Heinrich Weinel's *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testament* (1911) works completely inside the frame of the new interpretation.<sup>38</sup> Reventlow summarizes Krüger's and Wrede's basic ideas as follows:

G. Krüger (1896) demanded that the biblical theology of the NT be replaced by a history of the religion and literature of early Christianity. In the program of the history-of-religions school W. Wrede supported the following approach: the study of early Christian literature would be liberated from the rule of dogmatics only if one abandoned the "method of doctrinal concepts" and looked beyond the borders of the Canon [...] The task was then to depict the living early Christian religion in its development and self-manifestation.<sup>39</sup>

Räsänen, in his *Beyond*, limits the number of relevant approaches to two: either the Gablerian historical model or Wrede's history of religion. Mostly due to Räsänen's influence, the Krüger-Wrede theory has found new supporters in post-war scholarship. There is, however, no unanimity

<sup>37</sup> Harnack, *Das Wesen*, 84–91; see also Kantzenbach, *TRE XIV* (1985) 452–453.

<sup>38</sup> Reventlow, *ABD VI* (1992) 487.

<sup>39</sup> Reventlow, *ABD VI* (1992) 487.

among scholars who have adopted this approach, or even unity in their methodology, but the details of this issue will be discussed later.<sup>40</sup>

### 6.2. *From Stendahl to Barr: What Does it “Mean?”*

The main problem in the theory of biblical theology, in the Western tradition, has always been the relation between history and theology. Should theological presentations and overviews be written in terms of historical-critical investigation? And if they should, how is it possible to avoid the destructive results of liberal theology? Räisänen, of course, has demanded that the historical approach be adopted in such a manner that it shifts the focus onto the history of religion. Even before this, however, Krister Stendahl had already set the investigation of biblical theology onto this course. With his 1962 article in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* Stendahl made the “Gablerian” dichotomy—as it is commonly (mis-)represented—a dominating factor in the discussion for decades.<sup>41</sup>

Lutheran Stendahl writes in the twentieth-century German tradition. He develops a “two-stage” approach (“Zweistufenprogramm”) to biblical hermeneutics and thus belongs, in the Räisänen's opinion, with scholars who make a clear distinction between “historical” biblical theology and later dogmatic theology or at least some kind of contemporary interpretation. He claims that Stendahl marks the “return to Gabler's programme.”<sup>42</sup> The alleged “Gablerian” nature of Stendahl's theory, however, is forced. In his famous article Stendahl never mentions Gabler, and neither do his categories or even his epistemology correspond to those Gabler used. Therefore one must tread carefully when reading Stendahl's hermeneutics in its own context.

Instead of returning to the eighteenth-century rationalists, Stendahl starts with the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, which he calls by its original name. He states that biblical criticism has been irreversibly changed by the historical-critical investigation of the Bible. “The distance between biblical times and modern times was stressed,” and what is more important, “the difference between biblical thought and systematic theology became much more than that of diversification over against systematization or of

<sup>40</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 13–14. The issue will be discussed in chapter 6.6 below.

<sup>41</sup> Suffice it to recall Adam's note on Stendahl's article: no contribution to the discussion of biblical theology “can fail to address” Stendahl's dichotomy. Adam, *Making Sense*, 76.

<sup>42</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 74; Räisänen, *Neutestamentliche Theologie?*, 29–30.

concrete exemplification over against abstract propositions.”<sup>43</sup> Stendahl clings to historicist discourse by underlining the distance between the present world view and biblical presentation.

Stendahl is very detailed in his description and emphasizes particular features of the new method. He mentions form criticism and *Sitz im Leben*, the new catchwords that began to direct historical investigation. As “real” history was revealed under the theological reflection found in the texts themselves, thanks to the history-of-religion approach, the new school “drastically widened the hiatus between our time and that of the Bible.”<sup>44</sup> This state of historical investigation, then, led Stendahl to his famous dichotomy pitting the task of the historical study against the systematic or dogmatic reading.

Thereby a radically new stage was set for biblical interpretation. The question of meaning was split up in two tenses: “What *did* it mean?” and “What *does* it mean?” These questions were now kept apart long enough for the descriptive task to be considered in its own right.<sup>45</sup>

It is clear that Stendahl is dependent on the critical Gospel studies of the era, and this moulds his conception of interpretation, too. He even pits Schweitzer and Bultmann against Harnack who, despite his quite critical view of history, still carries Jesus “down without difficulty to the year 1899.”<sup>46</sup> After the work of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, there is no longer any historical Jesus in the traditional sense for Stendahl. The descriptive task, therefore, depends on the criterion of dissimilarity, even though Stendahl fails to mention this detail in his work. Nevertheless, this was standard biblical criticism after the Second World War, which is probably why Stendahl’s hermeneutical solution soon became very influential among New Testament scholars. For instance Barr, writing later in the revised edition of the *IDB Supplementary Volume*, summarizes Stendahl’s ideas as follows:

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<sup>43</sup> Stendahl, *IDB* 1 (1962) 418.

<sup>44</sup> Stendahl, *IDB* 1 (1962) 419–420. Furthermore, Stendahl claims that almost all German scholars at that time were “inspired by the same tension between the mind of a Semitic past and the thought of modern man.”

<sup>45</sup> Stendahl, *IDB* 1 (1962) 420. This is approximately the same as what Strecker later says when developing his dialectical “historical-eschatological” hermeneutics. According to Strecker one must make a distinction between two questions: what does the text say (“Was sagt der Text?”), and what does it mean (“Was meint der Text?”). Strecker, *Das Problem*, 26.

<sup>46</sup> Stendahl, *IDB* 1 (1962) 419.

Biblical theology, as he conceived it, had two great stages. The first was a descriptive task: to carry out an objective, historical description of the theology which lay within the Bible itself. The second was a hermeneutical task, through which a “translation” of the biblical thoughts into the modern situation was to be attempted. It was essential to keep the two apart, to distinguish between “what it meant” and “what it means.”<sup>47</sup>

Stendahl’s dichotomy may look quite traditional at first sight. Homiletics has always made this kind of distinction when applying biblical themes and ideas to sermons. But, as we noted, this is not what Stendahl means. His conception of the “objective,” historical description concerns the historical-critical reconstruction of the early Christian development of doctrine. In this he follows Käsemann who started the diversity discussion and predates Räisänen’s later formulations. The essential problem with Stendahl’s approach is that he is still completely indifferent to the obvious faults of the historical-critical investigation of Jesus. The methods of historical criticism did not produce a trustworthy picture of Jesus, a foundation on which “what it means” could be constructed. Instead, as we saw in chapter 2, that line of study resulted in an “unhistorical Jesus,” a figure who had been separated from history. This alone makes Stendahl’s hermeneutical theory invalid.<sup>48</sup>

The reception of Stendahl’s dichotomy in more recent biblical scholarship has been ambivalent, though. On the one hand, he has been called Gabler’s heir in reinstating the dichotomy between historically-oriented biblical theology and dogmatic theology, or historical and normative theology. On the other hand, many claim that Gabler has no true followers. The former claim builds a false reading as we have seen and reflects more the reader’s expectations than Gabler’s original ideas. Few scholar in the days of Stendahl believed that pure biblical theology would build on universal truths.

Even Räisänen himself speaks about the “unrealized program of separate tasks,” but he does not comment much on Stendahl’s ideas—he just

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<sup>47</sup> Barr, *IDBsupp* (1976) 106.

<sup>48</sup> Stendahl’s solution looks like a Bultmannian rewriting of the dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. As scholars feel free to abandon history, for several different reasons at that phase, the Christ of faith can be constructed in terms of personal significance. I have the impression that Mead misses this point since he focuses merely on the descriptive function of the Gabler-Stendahl approach. Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 85–86. The classical problem here is that when “meant” is separated from “means” one encounters a historical deconstruction. This is the exact point where Räisänen has posed a challenge to the writers of biblical theology.

describes them. Räisänen apparently thinks that the basic descriptive task is fine as it corresponds with the history-of-religion approach. Stendahl's interest in the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* could be a uniting factor but Räisänen does not pay much attention to it. Räisänen accepts the dichotomy between descriptive and normative, however, even though he actually denies the normative task of the systematic or constructive phase. In his hermeneutics concerning the "chain," "normative" is replaced by "actualizing."<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the discipline might profit from a redirection of its resources. Much more attention could be paid to *non-canonical* literature, the *history of the influence* of the Bible, and perhaps—moving from historical to theological issues—problems of *actualizing*.<sup>50</sup>

In this respect, Räisänen accepts the dichotomy but also reinterprets it. This is why he abandons Stendahl's terminology and proposes a new dichotomy, the essence of which probably does not differ much from that of his predecessor.

It is customary to speak of the problem of (historical) "reconstruction" and (theological) "interpretation" as the key question in New Testament theology. This pair of terms is somewhat misleading. After all, there can be no reconstruction without interpretation. Therefore, it is more appropriate to talk of the relation between two sorts of interpretation: historical and actualizing. A historical interpretation is not independent of the situation of the interpreter. Modern problems affect the choice of perspective and the way various phenomena are emphasized.<sup>51</sup>

These are not the only adversities Stendahl's theory has had to meet with. Assuming that the theory really means what it says, it has been quite easy for Ollenburg and Adam to show that its consistent application leads to apparent contradictions. First, the dichotomy between descriptive and

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<sup>49</sup> Later critics have noted that, according to a view adopted by many scholars today, all knowledge-claims have a normative character. For instance Matlock, referring to Michael Williams' post-Popperian epistemology, speaks of the "normative character of critical inquiry." After the death of inductivism, scholars usually admit that scholarly statements are value-laden and this should lead to a new and more open dialogue between differing views. Matlock, *Moving Beyond*, 370, 387. Even though I do not agree with all of Matlock's poststructuralist conclusions on the matter, his comments here are necessary and constructive. The old dichotomy between descriptive and normative just rewrites positivist discourse.

<sup>50</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 98; italics his.

<sup>51</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 108. In the previous chapters we have seen that Räisänen does not apply these ideas to Jesus-studies yet but, in the sphere of Pauline studies, he apparently has to admit that different pictures of Paul reflect different "historical interpretations."



normative is unsuitable because, as even Räisänen remarks in the quotation above, all historical statements have a normative element. Stendahl remains inside the “modern,” as Adam puts it. Stendahl’s “strict division of labor into ‘descriptive’ and ‘normative’ tasks once again recalls the modern concern for scientific autonomy.”<sup>52</sup> His hermeneutical approach is based on modernity’s “chronological determinism” that proclaims the inevitable gulf that separates “the contemporary interpreter from the text.” This necessarily leads to the acceptance of the “elitism of modernity.”<sup>53</sup>

Second, Stendahl’s second dichotomy between “meant” and “means” drifts into complete contradiction because he attempts to present both their principal difference and their interdependence. The difficulty is similar to that found in most hermeneutical patterns of the historical-critical era: if the text is not allowed to provide material for its (normative) interpretation, where does the information come from?

Therefore, both the “meant” and the “means” are temporally relative properties of the text, which are mutually exclusive: when the text meant its past meaning, it did not mean its present meaning, and vice versa. Yet the “means” is dependent upon the “meant,” for the systematician can’t know what it means without recourse to the “meant.” The “means” is not a property of the text itself, in other words, but a property of the “meant.”<sup>54</sup>

The contradictory nature of Stendahl’s hermeneutical theory is nicely revealed in Ollenburg’s and Adam’s analyses but, even all these convincing examples do not yet reveal the whole truth about the dichotomy in question. These critics have only investigated the nature of modern biblical criticism, not the nature of modern hermeneutics—and this makes all the difference. When Stendahl is placed in the context of biblical interpretation in the era of historical-critical investigation, his hermeneutical theory appears in quite a new light. He does not suggest a double reading of the *same* texts as he recommends descriptive and normative reading. Ollenburg and Adam are of course right in stating that the normative task necessarily depends on the historical reconstruction. This is no doubt what Stendahl implies—but this is also what he wants to suggest in the first place.

What is crucial is that Stendahl—along with his predecessors—claims that no theological work with the texts is possible or even allowed without

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<sup>52</sup> Adam, *Making Sense*, 80–81, 130. Cf. Ollenburg, *HBT* 8 (1986) 65–68.

<sup>53</sup> Adam, *Making Sense*, 84–85.

<sup>54</sup> Adam, *Making Sense*, 130–131; cf. Ollenburg, *HBT* 8 (1986) 86–88.



the historical-critical examination of the texts. This must always come first. As he states in his programmatic article: demythologizing “is certainly here to stay.”<sup>55</sup> The “meant,” for Stendahl, is the historical-critical reconstruction of biblical history. The “means,” in turn, can be anything from universal ideas to existential experience. In this respect, Stendahl is very consistent in what he states about the distinction between the descriptive and normative tasks.

This reveals though that Stendahl just reinstates the Reimarian criterion of dissimilarity and the dichotomy between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. In the historical-critical setting, “what it meant” means the demythologized Jesus and his political or social program. “What it means,” in turn, is a theologoumenon, an ahistorical statement that has only discursive justification. As we have noted throughout the study, this is the most common hermeneutical solution that in one form or another is included in most attempts to invent a theological counterpoint to historical-critical investigation. To say this does not mean that Stendahl would be completely consistent with his premises.

Despite the conventions accepted in the investigation of biblical criticism it is apparent that Stendahl has little to do with Gabler.<sup>56</sup> Gabler never supported a distinctively historical approach, and Stendahl would never accept the extracting of timeless, universal truths from biblical writings.<sup>57</sup> These two differ in epistemology, and they differ in the form of their hermeneutical program—not to mention their aims in biblical theology. In the Kantian context, universal truths were still considered mental categories that are necessarily and universally true, hence Gabler’s assumption that they can be detected by pure reason. Later, under the influence of Hegel’s phenomenology, ontology changed. Divine revelation was often understood in terms of a dialectic between a heavenly concept (“Begriff”) and its vague earthly representations (“Vorstellung”). As we reach Stendahl, his sympathies toward Bultmann reveal that the “means” part has become more or less a personal, existential issue. Even if there

<sup>55</sup> Stendahl, *IDB* 1 (1962) 422.

<sup>56</sup> It may in fact be that general overviews such as Boers, *Theology*, 36–37, have directed the reading of Gablerian biblical theology. At least this was the case with Räisänen’s views as we saw above.

<sup>57</sup> Ollenburger is, to my understanding, quite right in saying: “Gabler has no methodological disciples in the discipline of biblical theology.” Ollenburger, *Understanding the Word*, 46. “With the collapse of rationalist epistemology, to which Gabler was in large measure tied, and to the collapse of which Kant himself in large measure contributed, the possibility of Gabler’s program was foreclosed.”

is a kerygma behind propositional theology, it can hardly direct the construction of contemporary theology or provide any normative theology.

Stendahl is probably responsible for the new dichotomy between descriptive and normative in biblical theology. This is at least what Räisänen appears to suggest. It is probable, however, that Stendahl does not strive for a hermeneutics that abandons metaphysics completely. In some sense, he still follows Bultmann and does not demand *Entkerygmatisierung* as Räisänen does. Our investigation concerning the influence of philosophy in biblical hermeneutics has shown that it is quite difficult to provide a precise explanation of a scholar's theory. Scholars themselves may not even be quite precise about or aware of their premises—and they certainly do not explicate their preconditions very openly. Stendahl, for instance, is inevitably on his way to immanent interpretation. He builds on the history-of-religions school and demands the reinterpretation of ancient myths. Ontological issues are transformed into mere relations. The normative, for Stendahl, if there is one, is a matter of Christian impact and the “effect” of biblical ideas on contemporary readers.

Räisänen, then, supports the immanent current. His ideas concerning the chain of interpretation and history of influence confirm what he says about the abandonment of the metaphysical. One must be careful in noting, however, that the popular distinction between the historical task and the theological task or the two sorts of interpretation that Räisänen mentions, historical and actualizing, do not derive from Gabler. They do not even derive from Stendahl. In the history of interpretation there are numerous alternatives according to which the task of biblical theology can be defined. Any simplification on the issue does injustice to scholars who have presented their own views as oppositions to the previous theories—not as their continuation.

### 6.3. *The Flow of Existentialist Theology*

The development of New Testament scholarship can be seen either as a series of revolutionary new ideas that question previous approaches, or a constant flow where new scholars build on previous ideas. In certain respect, both views are correct. On the one hand, there are revolutions that produce visible conflicts with previous study. On the other hand, scholars usually build on something that they have learned. This is true also for existentialist theology.

When Rudolf Bultmann chose to interpret New Testament theology through the lens of Martin Heidegger's new existentialist philosophy, he brought something new to the field of biblical criticism. Nevertheless, he simultaneously built on Strauss's idealist rationalism as well as Wilhelm Herrmann's and Adolf von Harnack's Neo-Kantian pragmatism—not to mention the *Entmythologisierung* project of the German history-of-religions school at the end of the nineteenth century.

Bultmann the rationalist classified theological statements as mythological. The historical Jesus had already vanished from the picture. Bultmann drew quite a lot on history of religion and was convinced that sacramental theology and standard soteriology had been borrowed from Hellenistic mystery religions. Furthermore, in all his interpretation of Paul's theology, he assumed that Paul was a Gnostic. Propositional theology had little hope in such a situation. This is probably one of the reasons Bultmann developed his apologetic hermeneutics so that historical research could not threaten the integrity of the Christian message.

One of the main reasons to assume that this kind of mythical construction can be found behind New Testament theology is the conviction that biblical theology is actually based on Gnosticism. Bultmann states this without hesitation. "The mythology of the New Testament is in essence that of Jewish apocalyptic and the Gnostic redemption myths. A common feature of them both is their basic dualism, according to which the present world and its human inhabitants are under the control of daemonic, satanic powers, and stand in need of redemption."<sup>58</sup> In his monograph *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting* Bultmann explicates this view as clearly as possible.

Man's redemption—and at this point Primitive Christianity and Gnosticism are in agreement—can only come from the divine world as an event. It is something that must happen to man from outside. Now Christian faith claims that this is precisely what has happened in Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>59</sup>

This is how Bultmann sees the structure of biblical soteriology. We are probably justified in saying that Bultmann himself, not Räisänen, ended the era of writing New Testament theology. The crucial change is in his claim that propositions in the text do not denote the theology they wish to represent and also express. Since Bultmann proclaimed that there are

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<sup>58</sup> Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 15–16. For the analysis, see for instance Reventlow, *History* 4, 399–400.

<sup>59</sup> Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 196; original in *Das Urchristentum*, 218.

no valid theological statements at all in the New Testament, his so-called New Testament theology must actually be something else. “*Theological propositions*—even those of the New Testament—can never be the *object* of faith; they can only be the *explication* of the understanding which is inherent in faith itself.”<sup>60</sup> Bultmann himself was naturally quite open and frank with his views, and his theory is well known in scholarship. He replaced theology with anthropology and constructed a system of perfect authentic existence. New Testament “theology,” in this system, has been separated both from the narrative and the semantic structure of the texts.

There is one important question to be asked here: what can justify Bultmann’s solution to separate the idealist kerygma from theological propositions? The answer cannot be found directly in Heidegger’s existentialism because Heidegger never called inauthentic language the representation of Being itself. Bultmann appears to rewrite the Hegelian dichotomy Begriff/Vorstellung, and very much in a Straussian version. Mythical language, as Bultmann understands it, is treated like a Vorstellung (defective “form”) of a heavenly Begriff (the true kerygma). This is why Hegelian metaphysics, in principle, explains Bultmann’s hermeneutical theory despite the fact that his version differs somewhat from the original.<sup>61</sup>

This is not a standard interpretation of Bultmann’s hermeneutics. Scholars usually attend to Bultmann’s Kantian background and the tendency to avoid objectifying language. God cannot be made an object (*Gegenstand*) of human thought. This explanation, as we have seen, is correct as such. Bultmann does assume that daily language is unable to express anything about the substance of divine existence. Nevertheless, we also need to explain Bultmann’s most difficult concept: that of *kerygma*. What can divine address, God’s ineffable act, be like? How can we define it? Several attempts have been made, and scholars agree on the general description.

Kerygma, for Bultmann, is a term with two faces. Semantics, on the one hand, bring up the original idea concerning early Christian kerygma that, in terms of exegetical scrutiny, simply means the message to be proclaimed.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Bultmann, *Theology* 2, 237–238.

<sup>61</sup> Thiselton refers correctly to the Kantian background but pays little attention to Hegelian ontology, Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 168. I agree with O’Neill who, in his essay “*Bultmann and Hegel*,” suggests that “the crown and summit of Hegel’s system is surprisingly similar to the crown and summit of Bultmann’s theology.” O’Neill, *JTS* 21 (1970) 396. O’Neill does not discuss the dichotomy between Begriff and Vorstellung, though.

<sup>62</sup> This is how, for instance, Fuller describes Bultmann’s *Theology*: “The kerygma of the earliest church is critically reconstructed from the data of Acts, the Pauline letters, and

On this basis in the existentialist post-Bultmannian tradition, kerygma has also been understood as a form of ecclesiastical proclamation.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, this kerygma is simultaneously something behind language and words. It is the content of the message in the divine realm. Bultmann does not often present precise definitions of the kerygma but there are certain informative passages in his writings. Some of these describe kerygma through a negation, but the issue itself becomes clear. When opposing Harnack's cultural Protestantism, for instance, he writes: "Unfortunately this means that *the kerygma has ceased to be kerygma*: it is no longer the proclamation of the decisive act of God in Christ."<sup>64</sup> For Bultmann, theology is not about ethical precepts but God's divine act.

Bultmann continues by stating that for liberal theologians, "the great truths of religion and ethics are timeless and eternal," though it is "only within human history that they are realized." This is not sufficient for Bultmann though. Instead, kerygma represents "an *event* through which God has wrought man's redemption."<sup>65</sup> Just like in his *Theology*, Bultmann here emphasizes that kerygma is a divine act which people experience as an event. In chapter 3 we saw how Bultmann in his *Theology* explains the difference between a salvific message and theological propositions. This is also the passage where he presents one of the most precise definitions of kerygma.<sup>66</sup>

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the Synoptic tradition." Fuller, *Modern Interpreters*, 566. Even though this is a verbatim description, it may create confusion when discussing the concept of kerygma. The problem itself is caused by Bultmann, not Fuller. In the New Testament *kērygma* (message) derives from *kēryssō*, to proclaim.

<sup>63</sup> For instance Schmithals in his TRE article on Bultmann states that kerygma can be expressed in the form of theological statements that can later, in the course of tradition, also be reinterpreted and changed. "Das Kerygma kann sowohl in Gestalt theologischer Sätze gefaßt werden, die wiederholbar sind und im Wandel der Zeiten interpretiert und verändert werden müssen, wie in Gestalt der im Prinzip unwiederholbaren 'Predigt', der direkten, anredenden Verkündigung in konkreter Situation." Schmithals, *TRE VII* (1980) 392. This view relies on the idea that only preaching turns the "Jesus-event" into a "Heilsgeschehen," the salvific act of God.

<sup>64</sup> Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 13. Italics his. It is surprising that scholars seldom present any precise definition of this crucial term. As we saw, the TRE article on Bultmann is not helpful here, and neither is the RGG article. In the Anglo-saxon world, Macquarrie in his *Existential Theology* neglects the subject and the word kerygma cannot even be found in his index of important terms.

<sup>65</sup> Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 13.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. what Bultmann also says in *Kerygma and Myth*: "The liberal theologians of the last century were working on the wrong lines. They threw away not only the mythology but also the kerygma itself." Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 12.

When, therefore, the science of New Testament theology seeks to present faith as the origin of the theological statements, it obviously must present the kerygma and the self-understanding opened up by it in which faith unfolds itself. And that is just where the problem lurks! For both the kerygma and faith's self-understanding always appear in the texts, so far as they are expressed in words and sentences, already interpreted in some particular way—i.e. in theological thoughts. Although there are single statements in the New Testament which can be designated as specifically kerygmatic, even they are always formulated in a particular theological terminology—take, for instance, that simplest sentence, “Jesus, Lord” (II Cor. 4:5), for it presupposes a particular understanding of the term “Lord.”<sup>67</sup>

Bultmann believes that kerygma has no words. For him, it is something completely transcendent. There is no direct way from the divine kerygma to propositional language, as Bultmann's crucial statement proclaimed. The kerygma is just “what theology can never seize in definitive form.” For Bultmann, even the best and almost-authentic theological statements such as short confessions are already distorted. They express mundane motives and human intentions. Furthermore, and what usually is important for Bultmann, most of the Bible's language is also mythical.<sup>68</sup>

We have now reached the paradox that scholars call Bultmann's “structural inconsistency.” There is a contradiction between Bultmann's insistence on the reality of the heavenly kerygma/Begriff and the impermeability of heaven's wall which prevents believers from presenting true propositions about God's true nature and mission.

The objections to Bultmann's twofold insistence that theology cannot make mythological statements about God, on the one hand, and that theology must affirm that authentic existence becomes reality only as a result of the Christ-event, on the other hand, are obvious. The two positions seem clearly inconsistent. If theology cannot make mythological statements about God, and “express the other-worldly in terms of this world, and the divine in terms of human life”, theology must deny the exclusive importance of Jesus Christ. Either Jesus Christ must become one among many possible historical occasions for coming to a true non-mythological understanding of God—this is Schubert Ogden's solution so what he calls the “structural inconsistency” of Bultmann's thought—or the indispensability of Jesus Christ must be

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<sup>67</sup> Bultmann, *Theology* 2, 239.

<sup>68</sup> Bultmann, *Theology* 2, 240. In this respect Schmithals' interpretation of the kerygma described above is completely false. Cf. Schmithals, *TRE VII* (1980) 391–392. In Bultmann's thought, kerygma can never be expressed in words. Schmithals' interpretation of the ever changing kerygmatic tradition comes close to Räisänen's idea of the chain of interpretation, and they may even have some supporting arguments in common.

maintained at the expense of denying the other proposition and affirming that God *can* be spoken of objectively.<sup>69</sup>

It is quite apparent that Bultmann realised this paradox himself. In his *"The Hidden and the Revealed God"* Bultmann calls the situation a "riddle" and a "mystery." God does reveal himself to human beings and he can be experienced, but such an experience simply cannot be put into words. Nevertheless, theologians must *speak* about God. Ogden and O'Neill are right: Bultmann never solves the problem he faces.

God the mysterious and hidden must at the same time be the God who is revealed. Not, of course, in a revelation that one can know, that could be grasped in words and propositions, that would be limited to formula and book and to space and time; but rather in a revelation that continually opens up new heights and depths and thus leads through darkness, from clarity to clarity.<sup>70</sup>

In Bultmann's hermeneutics, the conditions for writing theology are too strict. Language no longer represents kerygma. As we noted earlier: demythologization is no decoding. The riddle remains unsolved and even Bultmann's own propositional presentation in *Theology of the New Testament* should probably be considered false.

Furthermore, this hermeneutical solution is something typical of Bultmann alone. Since he reads phenomenology through materialist historicism, he distances himself both from Hegel and Heidegger. *Vorstellung* no longer represents *Begriff*. Instead, the former is always considered corrupt.<sup>71</sup> Heidegger is famous for his claim that Being actually speaks "through" language. Language is the "house" of Being. For Bultmann, language is the prison of "weltlichkeit," reflecting the secular trust in mundane matters. Only one reservation needs to be made here. One must not confuse Bultmann's distinction between perfect kerygma and defective human language with the idea that empirical language as such, for him, would be problematic. Bultmann is a follower of Cartesian empiricism. He believes that scientific language can perfectly master reality and, for instance, perform *Entmythologisierung*.

<sup>69</sup> O'Neill, *JTS* 21 (1970) 389.

<sup>70</sup> Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, 34.

<sup>71</sup> O'Neill in fact holds that Bultmann has used Hegel's ideas in a more positive perspective: "Bultmann, like Hegel, first demythologized talk about God, and then saw, as part of the same process, the spiritual importance of the doctrine of reconciliation." O'Neill, *JTS* 21 (1970) 398. This would be Bultmann's solution to the paradox mentioned above. This may be partly true but one must admit that the problem concerning language remains.



But what about Hegel? Can we detect Hegelian terminology in Bultmann's writings? Certain passages in "New Testament and Mythology" come close. When explaining the views of the history-of-religions school, as well as its faults, Bultmann calls mythological expressions "Vorstellungen." Be this allusion accidental or intended, it is how he understands the nature of mythological language in principle. People do have true experiences of the divine kerygma, and this leads to an interpretation of religious experience, but every interpretation is captured in "empirical" or "historical" language. In contrast, kerygma belongs to the world of "Begriff," to the realm that is real but whose descriptions necessarily turn into "Vorstellungen," mundane or prosaic forms that only vaguely represent the original.

The importance of the New Testament, they saw, lay not in its teaching about religion and ethics but *in its actual religion and piety*. In comparison with that, all the dogma it contains, and therefore *all the mythological imagery (Vorstellungen) with its apparent objectivity, was of secondary importance or completely negligible*. The essence of the New Testament lay in the religious life it portrayed.<sup>72</sup>

Bultmann's hermeneutical dualism attests to why he then makes Gnosticism the ideal form of Christian thought. In chapter 3 we followed how Bultmann made Christian doctrine a product of a syncretistic process where authors from a Jewish background started to explicate their new faith in Christ in terms of Gnostic cosmology.

The most important development, however, was the interpretation of the person of Jesus in terms of the Gnostic redemption myth. He is a divine figure sent down from the celestial world of light, the Son of the Most High coming forth from the Father, veiled in earthly form and inaugurating the redemption through his work.<sup>73</sup>

This is the primary principle that directs Bultmann's interpretation. In his *Theology* Bultmann reserved an entire chapter for the investigation of Gnostic motifs behind early apostolic theology.<sup>74</sup> Paul based his soteriology on such motifs, too, but this is only part of the story. Bultmann says that

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<sup>72</sup> Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, 14; quoted according to Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 218–219, so that his italics and the addition of the original German word "Vorstellungen" can be seen. The word itself may of course be used without any Hegelian connotation.

<sup>73</sup> Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 196; original in *Das Urchristentum*, 219.

<sup>74</sup> Bultmann, *Theology I*, 164–183.



Paul, as a true Gnostic, was able to depart from Jewish descriptions and interpretations of history and direct his thoughts to heavenly wisdom.

But Paul expands the mystery idea. He does so by simultaneously interpreting Christ's death *in the categories of the Gnostic myth*, regarding his death as unified with his incarnation and resurrection or exaltation. In so doing he is again following a tradition that is to be inferred as having existed in Hellenistic Christianity before him, inasmuch as he cites the Christ-hymn (Phil. 2:6–11) in which that tradition had taken form.<sup>75</sup>

According to Bultmann, Jewish religiosity thus turns into Hellenistic Gnosticism as the Redeemer-mythos is applied in Christology. Paul, in this picture, is a Gnostic who develops a mystery religion. In a paradoxical way Paul, however, is simultaneously a protagonist for any existentialist who denies the visible world and focuses true theology as only in the realm of the Spirit. The conclusions that can or may be drawn from such a view will be discussed later in chapter 9.

How should one assess this kind of hermeneutical move? Bultmann naturally needed to create a hermeneutical theory to bridge the gap between kerygmatic reality and mythical language but, as we have seen, commentators today assume that he never succeeded and was caught in a paradox instead. The way from anthropology to theology was closed. Heidegger was of no help here: his concept of Dasein remained in the immanent realm. This confirms our claim that Bultmann's hermeneutics appears to build on dualist Hegelian ontology. It results in apophatic theology where *Vorstellungen* are but myths. There is no longer room for propositional New Testament theology.

The relation between Räisänen and Bultmann needs to be assessed on these premises. Räisänen, too, assumes that the theological propositions in the text do not represent religious truths. Even though the two systems these scholars then developed differ from each other, the point of departure is identical. Bultmann, unlike Räisänen, remains a metaphysicist, however, as he believes in *kerygma*. He assumes that there must be an apophatic divine inspiration that addresses ("rede") people. The difficult problem for New Testament theology here is that, such divine "speech" does not have words. It cannot be put into statements or expressed in propositions.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Bultmann, *Theology I*, 298; italics his. Cf. p. 190 on wisdom and knowledge.

<sup>76</sup> One distinctive feature is that Räisänen has no equivalent for authentic language. Neither does he speak of authentic experience because, for him, only interpretations can be valid or invalid (mythical or immoral).

Bultmann's pupils developed New Testament theology in several ways. Their master's heritage was not easy to handle, though. On the one hand, scholars were supposed to treat mythological statements with sufficient harshness. On the other hand, they were to attempt interpreting the forms of kerygma—whatever that meant in such a tradition—in order to still contemplate theology. It is understandable that in such a situation Bultmann's original dualism did not hold in its full force.

There are many versions of Bultmannian theology in Germany. Ernst Käsemann started the influential discussion on the diversity of early Christian theology (*Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, 1964). Hans Conzelmann in his *Grundriss der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (1967) then gave a description of such diverse fields. He attempted to find some unity of experience in the middle of theological discrepancy. Conzelmann is probably the first to build a kerygmatic theology in a Bultmannian sense, starting his analysis with a treatment of the early church's kerygma.<sup>77</sup> Even though he does address for instance the question of Jesus' messianic identity, he remains an existentialist whose intentions focus merely on the New Testament writers' subjective mental world and personal experiences. Since the link to the historical Jesus has been broken, theology can be justified merely by the "Christ of faith" on whom the kerygmatic message of the early Church focuses.<sup>78</sup>

Kerygmatic theology is in the foreground also in Hans Hübner's huge presentation *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments 1–3* (1990–1995). Hübner, one of the remarkable Bultmannian Göttingen scholars, does deal with possible links between the Old Testament and the New, but unlike Stuhlmacher who has published a monograph under that same title (see below), Hübner does not rely on continuity. He keeps the Old Testament rather autonomous and holds it at a distance from the New Testament. Most of Hübner's work was been written in the 1980s, but it is somewhat remarkable that the historical Jesus does not appear in it. Only towards the end of the third part is the issue dealt with, but even here his conclusions are directed by a Bultmannian historical criticism. As a pupil of *Entmythologisierung*, Hübner cannot find a unity between different parts of the New Testament—not to mention find historical Jesus himself. The title "Biblische," in this sense, remains quite ungrounded.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Conzelmann, *Theologie*, 24.

<sup>78</sup> Conzelmann, *Theologie*, 45.

<sup>79</sup> Hübner, *Theologie III*, 253f. For a similar Bultmannian approach, see Schmithals, *The Theology of the First Christians* (1997, German original 1994). Via remarks that Schmithals'

Paul has the key role here, as one might expect. Hübner reads the apostle as a Lutheran scholar and exegete. The center of Paul's thought world, the "Mitte," is undoubtedly justification by faith, *sola fide*. In this Hübner differs essentially from Räisänen and the covenantal nomism school, as noted before.<sup>80</sup> Hübner's "biblical" theology, in this respect, is kerygmatic theology. He does not search for any interaction between different texts. Instead, he seeks a kind of kerygmatic unity inside the New Testament. Even though Hübner postulates the essential diversity of the writings, he no doubt belongs to those scholars who, unlike Räisänen, seek for a basic unity both in New Testament theology and in Christian faith.<sup>81</sup>

The issue of unity and diversity is essential for the next Göttingen theologian on our list, Georg Strecker. In his *Theology of the New Testament* (in German 1996, translation 2000) he presents a large Bultmannian compilation of New Testament ideas. Following Bultmann, Strecker states that theology must deal with myths. For Strecker, the methodological essence of writing a New Testament theology is "laying bare the structures" on which the myths are grounded. Strecker is interested in structures of belief. He assumes that religious experience gives birth to particular cognitive structures that can be investigated. This must not be confused with traditional New Testament theology. Strecker makes a distinction between structure and theology. He just attempts to define and analyze a magnitude of structures, "theologies," if you like.<sup>82</sup>

Since all expressions of religious experience imply structures of believing comprehension, even if the authors of the New Testament documents were not necessarily aware of this in particular cases, such cognitive structures were also fundamental to the New Testament's witness of the act of God in Jesus Christ. Such structures are the subject of the following inquiry.<sup>83</sup>

As an heir to redaction criticism, Strecker has a method for detecting different layers of theological views. The history-of-religion approach, in turn, helps him classify different cognitive structures. Together they make

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methodological tendency has a "disintegrative effect." Schmithals "characteristically traces paragraphs" and motifs and different theological images "back to their presumed source *behind* the text," and this prevents him from "taking a steady look at coherences *within* the text." Via, *Theology*, 36.

<sup>80</sup> Hübner, *Theologie II*, 52, 80, 274, 412.

<sup>81</sup> Hasel notes Hübner's habit of making a distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament, as well as the difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. Hasel, *Andrews University Studies* 33 (1995) 71.

<sup>82</sup> See Strecker, *Theology*, 2–4

<sup>83</sup> Strecker, *Theology*, 2.

a multitude.<sup>84</sup> For Strecker, a diversity of New Testament “structures” is unavoidable. Different structures contradict each other and remain in tension when compared. For instance, there is almost no continuity whatsoever between Jesus and Paul. This is why he rejects traditional biblical theology. Strecker also criticizes pre-Enlightenment views of biblical inspiration that, according to his view, still direct theological attempts to find continuity between the Testaments. In Strecker’s Bultmannian theology, the early Christian kerygma interprets only “the Christ-event,” nothing more.

The Christ-event to which the early Christian kerygma testifies is the decisive point of orientation from which the theological conception of the New Testament authors proceeds. The kerygma is not to be subordinated to the schema of a “biblical theology.” The kerygma breaches the material unity of Old and New Testaments, since despite the continuity with Old Testament tradition, from the point of view both of literary history and theology the New Testament stands in a relation of discontinuity to the Old Testament. The kerygma is not the guarantee of the integrity of the biblical canon, since the material content it affirms not only stands in diastasis to the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament is interpreted in different ways.<sup>85</sup>

One more detail connects Strecker and other Bultmannians: he finds the core of Christian theology in Jesus’ resurrection. On the one hand, it is the center of theology—probably as a structure, not a system—and, on the other hand, it remains something that ultimately escapes the eye of a historian. This makes it a perfect cornerstone for Christian theology, whatever that ultimately ends up being, among all the different cognitive structures. Strecker must apparently construct some kind of hierarchy of structures. Nevertheless, Strecker’s theology can be reduced to a kerygma-theology. It is quite an autonomous construction of theological thoughts. The key writer, naturally, is the apostle Paul, as was the case already in Bultmann’s theology. These two premises, the centrality of the resurrection and kerygma-theology, do not serve the Bible’s unity though.<sup>86</sup> Diversity

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<sup>84</sup> Rowe, *JBL* 125 (2006) 400, mentions Strecker’s interest in “cognitive structures of religious experience.”

<sup>85</sup> Strecker, *Theology*, 8. Matera notes that Strecker’s approach is “redactional in nature.” Strecker seeks the theology of the New Testament writers “in light of their editorial activity.” Matera, *CBQ* 67 (2005) 7.

<sup>86</sup> Joachim Gnllka’s monograph *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* while predating Strecker’s work, resembles the latter in stating that the unifying principle of New Testament theology can be found in the kerygma of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Gnllka, *Theologie*, 462–463.

prevails. For Strecker, there is no basic unity in New Testament theology but merely a miscellaneous group of contradictory cognitive structures. It is uncertain whether calling them theologies does them an injustice.<sup>87</sup>

Furthermore, Strecker's monograph is clearly a historical-critical synthesis of the so-called New Testament theology. He is on his way to the history-of-religion approach that Räisänen has promoted. He has not yet arrived, though, because he still emphasizes Bultmannian kerygmatic theology, which Räisänen left behind. For Strecker, the New Testament is a "historically-conditioned construct," burdened by all kinds of defects that history has brought along. The only essential issue theologically is the Christ-event. Strecker still believes that it should direct both New Testament theology and the Church's faith.<sup>88</sup>

After Strecker, German Bultmannian New Testament interpretation has no doubt reached its peak in Udo Schnelle's monograph *Theology of the New Testament* (in German 2007, translation 2009). Schnelle agrees with his predecessors at Göttingen in that it is no longer possible to write a complete biblical theology of both the Old and New Testament. It has become impossible since (1) the Old Testament does not speak about Jesus, (2) the resurrection of a crucified man cannot fit any meaningful structures in the ancient world (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23), and (3) even though the Old Testament is an important cultural and theological context for the New Testament, it is not the only one. For Schnelle, the search for a "center" in New Testament theology is not useful. Instead, one should focus on different interpretations of faith.<sup>89</sup>

In his reformulated kerygmatic theology, Schnelle focuses on the identity of early congregations. He follows Räisänen in adopting Luckmann's sociological theory that speaks of symbolic worlds. The unity of theology

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<sup>87</sup> Räisänen's estimation of Strecker's theology follows the rather narrow principles he has chosen for his analysis in the *Beyond*. He first applauds Strecker's aim "to present the different conceptions in their plurality." Then he addresses only his historical approach and remarks that Strecker "opposes Stuhlmacher's project." This means that Strecker rejects pan-biblical theologies, "for the 'Christ-event' stands in discontinuity to Old Testament traditions." Räisänen, *Beyond*, 2nd ed., 129–130. Räisänen gives the reader no information about whether he himself accepts the Bultmannian use of the existentialist concept of the Christ-event in the hermeneutical theory. He just accepts the result.

<sup>88</sup> Merk remarks that German biblical theology after Bultmann attempted to find the center, *Mitte*, of early theology from the apostolic witness of the Easter event (Osterkerygma), and this was believed to open ways also to the significance of the historical Jesus. Merk, *TRE* 6 (1980) 473.

<sup>89</sup> Schnelle, *Theology*, 51–52.

is not of interest, but different processes of signification and a particular meaning-formation are.

The writings of the New Testament are the result of a comprehensive and multilayered process of meaning-formation. Religious experiences of groups and individuals always generate such processes of meaning-formation, and these are then expressed in narratives, rituals, and the composition of texts to facilitate their communication. So in the face of the reality of the cross and resurrection such acts of meaning-formation were inevitable. *The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead was a revelatory event that opened up the meaning of his life. Such an event called for acts of meaning-formation from those who believed it!* All early Christian authors were faced with the task of bringing the unique events of the cross and resurrection, which transcended the boundaries of everyday life, into a theological meaning structure.<sup>90</sup>

Even though Schnelle does write on the historical Jesus more than Bultmann he still relies on the Jesus of the *Entmythologisierung*. This portrait of Jesus is constructed through the criterion of dissimilarity. Schnelle accepts a greater degree of self-consciousness in Jesus than many of his predecessors, though. Following an eschatological interpretation he states that Jesus must have expected to take part in the execution of eschatological judgment. He really thought of himself as the Son of Man who would be enthroned in the parousia. Schnelle remains cautious, however, and expresses his point only through a negation: “*The life of Jesus was not unmessianic!*”<sup>91</sup>

Like Strecker above, Schnelle makes the resurrection the *mitte* of New Testament theology. The raising of Jesus from the dead is a “revelatory event,” that brings out his life’s real meaning. Such a term, familiar from existentialist theology, once again frees theology from history but also connects the apostles’ inner experience to an “event.” Furthermore, Schnelle emphasizes that Jesus’s tomb must have been empty. Had it not, the historical nature of the resurrection would be corrupt.<sup>92</sup>

The existentialist approach to New Testament theology no doubt attempts to solve some of the problems that rationalism created concerning

<sup>90</sup> Schnelle, *Theology*, 54–55.

<sup>91</sup> Schnelle, *Theology*, 155; italics his.

<sup>92</sup> For an even more traditional Bultmannian treatment of New Testament theology, see Schmithals, *The Theology of the First Christians*. Schmithals does emphasize the perspective of the “Christ of faith,” but like Lohse, he makes an effort to integrate the proclamation of the historical Jesus into the picture. For Schmithals, Jesus is an apocalypticist, and this explains some features in early Christian theology, too. Schmithals, *Theology*, 4–12.

the content of theology. The difficult question remains however: is there anything left after the demythologizing of the Bible? Scholars following Bultmann attempt to find the answer in personal experience and the kerygma as divine address to human beings. The hermeneutical problem with this solution is that biblical theology in this context remains sporadic and inconsistent. Furthermore, their kerygmatic theology of the New Testament has most often been merely Pauline theology—and to be sure, an existentialist or anthropological version of it. Jesus' teaching, eschatology, and messianology, in addition to traditional Pauline themes such as justification and sanctification, are still kept at a distance in these attempts. This is probably why most of the recent currents in New Testament theology search for something new.

#### 6.4. *The Resuscitation of Biblical Theology*

Biblical theology, accepting the historical task and focusing on the witness of the Scriptures, has been revived in Germany through the persistent work of the new Tübingen school directed by Otto Michel, Martin Hengel, Peter Stuhlmacher, Otto Betz, and Otfried Hofius. The new school is known for its renewed history-of-religion approach investigating Second Temple Judaism and its influence on emerging Christianity. Biblical theology, thus, is placed in context and, as a result, sensitivity to the environment where theology has emerged is remarkable even though the focus is usually on the canonical texts themselves.

Earlier Adolf Schlatter, whose work later influenced Goppelt among others, explained canonical theology with the help of Second Temple Jewish teachings. Scholars like Strecker criticized this kind of study, as we saw above, and even rejected it. Gradually though, as Bultmann's interpretations have become unpopular, such an approach has gained new ground. In a sense, the new Tübingen school (Stuhlmacher) rivals the Göttingen tradition.<sup>93</sup>

Stuhlmacher's work on biblical theology (*Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* 1–2, 1992–1999) begins with the statement that the writing of a biblical theology must take biblical texts as its point of departure: "this proclamation gives witness to the one sole God who has created the earth, chosen Israel as His own people, and who has sent Jesus as Christ to

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<sup>93</sup> Stuhlmacher has written on the influence of Schlatter, "Adolf Schlatter's Interpretation of Scripture." *NTS* 24 (1978) 433–446.



make salvation possible both to the Jews and the pagans.” This is the only way to avoid offending the very nature of the texts. Stuhlmacher means especially the relation of the New Testament to Old Testament thought world.<sup>94</sup> What lies in between is Second Temple Jewish theology and it can help putting New Testament ideas in the right perspective.<sup>95</sup>

Stuhlmacher's scholarly work has little to do with the reductionist history-of-religion school represented for instance by Bousset or even Bultmann. As scholarship after the Second World War opened up to Jewish studies, the investigation of Second Temple Judaism started to flourish especially in Tübingen. Stuhlmacher's *Biblische Theologie* is the result of a life-long interest in the proper Jewish context of New Testament writings and, therefore, the *biblical* approach means, primarily, a contextual approach that has turned out to be fruitful for this subject.<sup>96</sup>

Regarding the theory of biblical theology and hermeneutics, Stuhlmacher naturally belongs to the central developers of the field with his “hermeneutics of consent.” Already quite early (1973) Stuhlmacher drafted an outline of a New Testament theology “which is open to the Old Testament, and which attempts to discover the traditional and interpretative context of both Old and New Testament traditions.”<sup>97</sup> Later he provided the theoretical background for his hermeneutical work called *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik* and presented the principles for the hermeneutics of consent.<sup>98</sup> The English version of these principles mentions the most famous of them first: an “openness to transcendence.” Furthermore, Stuhlmacher reminds us that the approach in

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<sup>94</sup> The role of the Old Testament in biblical theology has also been emphasized by Samuel Terrien in his *The Elusive Presence* (1978), see pp. 4–7; and Horst Seebass, *Der Gott der ganzen Bibel* (1982), see pp. 15–33.

<sup>95</sup> Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie I*, 38. A little later Klaus Berger published his *Theologiegeschichte* (1994) where he focused on the various “Traditionslinien” in early Christianity and put them in their proper historical context.

<sup>96</sup> This point of departure is important to notice because Räisänen in his criticism has called Stuhlmacher's theology simply a “canonical” or “pan-biblical” approach. Räisänen, *Beyond 2nd ed.*, 120–121; similar comments were first introduced in Räisänen's review of Stuhlmacher's book in 1993, Räisänen, *TAik* 98 (1993) 174–75. There are two mistakes in that assessment. First, Stuhlmacher investigates an extensive number of Second Temple Jewish texts and, second, in that phase of biblical scholarship almost no one rejected the significance of the canon as Räisänen does, not even the Bultmannian scholars, as we saw above. The main point in Räisänen's review is that in his opinion any writing of a New Testament theology is a “religious” decision.

<sup>97</sup> Stuhlmacher, *ZTK* 70 (1973) 375. For Stuhlmacher's relation to Gese and the Tübingen Old Testament theology, see Reventlow, *ABD VI* (1992) 499.

<sup>98</sup> Stuhlmacher, *Hermeneutik*, 222–224.



biblical theology requires “methodological verifiability.” Biblical theology is a scholarly task and it must “as far as possible be verifiable as to method, reasoned out, and capable of correction.”<sup>99</sup>

Furthermore, as Rowe notes, “there has also been a significant shift in NT theological research with respect to Jesus.”<sup>100</sup> To be frank, this was not a complete shift in German scholarship since scholars from Cullmann to Jeremias and Goppelt had never accepted the reductionist view of the Straussian liberal tradition and its Bultmannian current. Stuhlmacher, however, who began as Käsemann’s pupil, has made a move towards independence and struggled his way to a new direction and becoming thus one of the first representatives of the Third Quest. Also his *Biblische Theologie* starts with Jesus’ teaching. Stuhlmacher centers on the concept of *euangelion*, the gospel. The term derives from the proclamation of the great Old Testament prophets who spoke about the realization of God’s divine kingship at the end of days. There is continuity also with Pauline theology since, when the apostle-to-be meets with the Resurrected One, *euangelion* becomes a key term for him. It helps Paul to interpret how God’s righteousness will be revealed.

As lived out by Jesus, modeled by the proclamation of Paul, and thought through by the Johannine school in the power of the Spirit, the one apostolic gospel of God’s reconciliation with human beings through his only begotten Son Jesus Christ is quite simply the message of salvation for the world.<sup>101</sup>

For Stuhlmacher, God’s righteousness (*dikaiosynē*) means his saving work, and he reveals it as he lets his Son die for the sins of humankind. Jesus himself proclaims that the Son of Man will give his life “as ransom” for the sins of human beings. Paul then describes Jesus as a sin offering. His blood will provide atonement as a substitutional offer. This is why *dikaiosynē theou* produces justification by faith, and the new community grows by the help of this gospel.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Stuhlmacher discusses his principles in detail in *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 85–87.

<sup>100</sup> Rowe, *JBL* 125 (2006) 406.

<sup>101</sup> Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie II*, 320; for the quotation in English, see Schnelle, *Theology*, 50–51. Stuhlmacher has been criticized for his “hermeneutic of consent” that claims to be “open to transcendence.” See Collins, *Hebrew Bible*, 7; referring to Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism*, 84. This proves that the basic solutions in biblical theology are still dependent on the early Reimarian and Rankean views—or their questioning.

<sup>102</sup> Matera says that the ministry of Jesus has a “foundational role” in Stuhlmacher’s theology but continues by saying that his presentation of Jesus “is not to be confused with a reconstruction of the historical Jesus.” Matera, *CBQ* 67 (2005) 11. He wishes to present

Stuhlmacher could be classified among scholars who wish to explain biblical theology with a particular center that has explanatory power over all the writings but, strictly speaking, he searches for themes that carry through the narratives. He calls the main motif the theology of reconciliation. His solution has a theological design, naturally, because such a hermeneutical choice does not attempt to reduce all themes into just one. Instead, the prioritizing by theological principles means that, according to Stuhlmacher, the theological underpinings in several texts are oriented towards this basic theme.

Through Stuhlmacher's writings biblical theology has gained new perspectives. The most important of these is probably his expertise in Second Temple Judaism and his search for the traditional and interpretative context that opens up the thought world of the New Testament authors. He has also shown, in his own special German and historical context, courage in allowing the authors to have their convictions about the divine without squeezing theological ideas into a sociological reduction. In this respect he has opened the way for later canonical theology and narrative approaches.<sup>103</sup>

In the Anglo-saxon world, the resuscitation of the traditional line is usually ascribed to George Caird and his posthumously published *New Testament Theology* (1994). The work that L.D. Hurst completed and edited has a deliberate ecclesial intention. Caird states that New Testament texts were both born and preserved inside an active and functioning community. Therefore, New Testament theology is a matter of those "involved." This is the attitude that scholars should attempt to achieve, as well, or at least understand. Proper New Testament theology is sympathetic towards its object.<sup>104</sup>

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Stuhlmacher as a dogmatician whose work on Jesus is not based on historical research: "For Stuhlmacher, as for Adolf Schlatter, the earthly Jesus is none other than the Christ of faith." Matera pays no attention to the fact that Stuhlmacher is not a Bultmannian scholar but belongs to the Third Quest of new Jesus-studies.

<sup>103</sup> Räisänen is critical towards Stuhlmacher's position. For him it represents "harmonizing conservatism." There are several reasons for this: Stuhlmacher attends to the use of the Old Testament in the New, and places Jesus inside New Testament theology. Räisänen calls this a "pan-biblical theology" and rejects it because it "takes the ecclesial concept of the canon as its point of departure." Räisänen, *Beyond 2nd ed.*, 121–122. Räisänen is consistent, of course, in terms of his own principles. In his *Beyond* he appears to criticize scholars for those features that differ from his Wredean project. The only positive element he finds in Stuhlmacher is that he acknowledges "remarkable discrepancies" e.g. between Paul and James, or Paul and Matthew.

<sup>104</sup> Caird, *Theology*, 18–19.

Caird's presentation is dogmatic in the sense that he studies New Testament theology from the point of view of salvation. He first treats the issue of anthropology as well as the reality of sin. Then he moves on to investigate the conditions of salvation that different authors present in their writings. Caird says that the task of a writer of New Testament theology is to sit in on an "apostolic meeting", an ecumenical meeting where different subjects of Christian doctrine are discussed.<sup>105</sup>

The presupposition of our study is simply stated: to write a New Testament theology is to preside at a conference of faith and order. Around the table sit the authors of the New Testament, and it is the presider's task to engage them in a colloquium about theological matters which they themselves have placed on the agenda.<sup>106</sup>

It is not the scholar's task to harmonize all different views that appear in the discussion, says Caird. They belong to different contexts and reflect changing situations. Scholars must focus strictly on matters such as Christology and eschatology. This is how the theological content of the writings can be analyzed and explicated.<sup>107</sup>

According to Caird, there are several influential metanarratives in the New Testament writings. He refers for instance to the exile and restoration. Caird explains the "gospel" as the realization of God's kingship that has occasionally been disregarded by the people of Israel. Jesus' message, however, is not prominent in Caird's theology, even though such issues could hint in that direction. The "conference of faith and order" centers on doctrinal issues, and it is natural that Paul's letters play a significant role here. Caird studies reconciliation, justification, and eschatology, among other topics. When treating Christology he speaks of the significance of

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<sup>105</sup> Matera prefers the word descriptive but, in reality, Caird goes beyond that, see Matera, *CBQ* 67 (2005) 8.

<sup>106</sup> Caird, *Theology*, 18. In Räisänen's opinion Caird's approach—accepting the canonical principle for example—is basically conservative and harmonizing. Caird's speculation over the imminent end as well as parousia, however, makes Räisänen remark: "His example shows how radical and conservative theological exegesis meet." Räisänen, *Beyond*, 127–128.

<sup>107</sup> Philip Esler, in his *New Testament Theology*, shares Caird's intentions in many ways. He acknowledges the importance of historical work but, following the ideas of Stendahl, he defines the primary task as descriptive. His approach is theological in the traditional sense of the word, though. He opens the presentation by stating that the New Testament is "a fundamental resource for the maintenance of Christian life." Like Caird, he focuses on communication. Even the subtitle of the book says: "Communion and Community." Esler, *Theology*, 1–3, 30, 36–37. Rowe reminds us that to perform a descriptive task with a theological intention is not easy, and it depends on the idea of "interpersonal communication." Rowe, *JBL* 125 (2006) 403.

a theological topos called the divine agent. In later Christological studies, this subject has become quite popular, although Caird studies the message of the historical Jesus only in the last chapter of his book. Basing his conclusions on the theology of the apostles he attempts to solve certain problems that the "quest for the historical Jesus" has brought up. Caird clearly wants to dissolve the dichotomy between Jesus of history and Christ of faith.<sup>108</sup>

Biblical theology focusing on salvation history has been an influential current, especially in the Anglo-American world, and it has been linked both with the biblical theology movement and the evangelical movement and its theology. Most New Testament theologies of that kind have no doubt come from that direction. Salvation history, disparaged by Räisänen and rejected by several scholars in the Stendahl-Barr tradition, did not originally specify a hermeneutical attitude at all. Instead, starting with Jeremias and Cullmann, scholars use the term as a theological motif found in the texts themselves. A number of more recent writers also use it in this manner. The idea itself should not be abandoned just because it, apparently, fits too well in the thought world of New Testament writings. What the theory maintains is simply that the apostles, when explaining the significance of Jesus' life and work, describe it as the fulfilment of God's salvific plan on the earth. Even though the claim is quite general, textual evidence for its accuracy is convincing.<sup>109</sup>

Due to the influence of new Tübingen scholarship, biblical theology (Biblische Theologie) attempts to solve certain problems in traditional dogmatic interpretation by placing New Testament texts in their natural context within the history of Second Temple Judaism. Their theological constructions are built through an interaction between texts and history, as well as broad generalizations and detailed study. Theology in these reconstructions usually centers on the crucial issues of Jewish faith in the Roman period. Generalizations enable writers to pick up themes that are common to many different texts. There is a danger, however, especially in the shorter presentations, of remaining on a rather general theological and thematical level.

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<sup>108</sup> Caird, *Theology*, 31, 136, 345. Also Jon Isaak in his *New Testament Theology* builds on the work of Caird. Esler above stayed on the theoretical level but Isaak wishes to write a descriptive theology by concentrating on the "contribution" of Paul and other writers of the New Testament. See for instance Isaak, *Theology*, 19, 55, 103. After discussing the different contributions, he presents a thematic treatment of theology. Isaak, *Theology*, 271ff.

<sup>109</sup> Ladd, *Theology*, 20–28; for the methodology, see Guthrie, *Theology*, 36–38, 72–73. For the history of this line of study, see also Reventlow, *ABD VI* (1992) 497.

Ferdinand Hahn's relatively new work *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* 1–2, (2002–2005) has an aim similar to Caird's. Hahn's substantial theology (some 1700 pages) focuses on the religious identity of the authors. His approach has a German flavor, though, since he cannot leave behind the historical-critical methodology as many younger authors do. Nevertheless, Hahn states that New Testament writings are based on a truth claim. It is clear to anyone reading these texts that the authors themselves believe deeply in the issues they treat. The task of writing a New Testament theology, thus, is to study how the reality of salvation is expressed in different writings.

Hahn deviates from the Bultmannian approach in that he maintains that the historical Jesus belongs inside New Testament theology, not just to its preconditions. Theology does not merely focus on the "Christ of faith" proclaimed by the congregation but it must necessarily search for a connection between Jesus and the apostolic community.<sup>110</sup> Despite this premise, Hahn does not find much substance in Jesus' teaching. In his large three-part monograph, less than one hundred pages treat Jesus. Nevertheless, according to Hahn the unity and diversity problem is important. His solution is based on a hierarchy of truths, "Hierarchie der Wahrheiten," a new concept here but one that has been used in dogmatics before.<sup>111</sup>

In certain matters Hahn does give in to the post-Bultmannian tradition, though. His work has been divided in two parts. The first investigates the multitude and diversity (Vielfalt) of New Testament material. Hahn investigates the texts by sorting out the diversity of New Testament testimony. The second part has a systematic intent so he constructs a biblical theology. He is convinced that his analysis produces material for a more synthesizing study. In this respect Hahn's work is related to James Dunn's "unity and diversity" project, which the latter has promoted in several books. The difference between these scholars is that Hahn still seeks a constructive approach.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Matera remarks that, for Hahn, Jesus' message is an "integral part of NT theology." Matera, *CBQ* 67 (2005) 13. Rowe notes that, in Hahn's first volume which focuses on ["Jesus-tradition," there is an "interpretive necessity" for a "Rückfrage nach Jesus." Rowe, *JBL* 125 (2006) 394.

<sup>111</sup> Hahn, *Theologie I*, 27.

<sup>112</sup> Hahn, *Theologie I*, 22. Cf. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 1–7, 369–374. A new and updated edition of the monograph was published in 1990. With Rowe one must admit, however, that Hahn favors unity and, thus, opposes Käsemann's dualism. "Here Käsemann is reversed: the radical diversity of the NT does not preclude but instead discloses its unity." Rowe, *JBL* 125 (2006) 395.

A completely new genre has also been introduced in the treatment of New Testament theology. Anthony C. Thiselton has, in his *Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (2007), presented an extensive analysis concerning the relation of dogmatic themes and categories and their scriptural attestation. Furthermore, he broadens the discussion of dogmatic issues by bringing in topics that grow from New Testament theology itself. In this monograph, Thiselton first treats the Trinity, but then moves to issues such as anthropology, hamartology, redemption, Christology, and eschatology.<sup>113</sup>

According to Thiselton, it is crucial for us to find a suitable “horizon of understanding” within which “the subject matter assumes its proper context for a fruitful understanding.”

The New Testament writers firmly place an understanding of the work of Christ *within horizons of understanding drawn from the Old Testament*. It is useless to isolate questions about whether the death of Jesus Christ should be interpreted *as a sacrifice* without understanding how deeply it is embedded in Old Testament tradition concerning sacrifice, whether or not twenty-first-century readers of the New Testament dwell within such a horizon. More fundamentally than this, a theology of *divine grace* is absolutely paramount for reassessing the well-known arguments about expiation, propitiation, and related concepts.<sup>114</sup>

Thiselton’s work certainly belongs to the field of New Testament theology. Features of his approach can naturally be seen in certain monographs preceding his but that have a dogmatic perspective. Thiselton’s monograph is the most extensive of these and serves as a new standard in finding a necessary interaction between biblical studies and systematic theology.

We are justified in saying that the traditional biblical theology approach, or at least a reading with doctrinal intention, still has significance in several monographs of New Testament theology. Stuhlmacher evidently hit the mark when implying that the attitude toward “transcendence” is a key factor as we attempt to assess essential differences between theories in biblical theology. This is precisely how Barr has criticized the Old Testament scholar Brevard S. Childs, the creator of canonical reading in the United States. It is quite clear that the Stendahl-Barr school has supported historical-critical reductionism, whereas scholars from Stuhlmacher to

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<sup>113</sup> Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 223, 376.

<sup>114</sup> Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 312. He also quotes Pannenberg saying that while “a later age may find it hard” to understand or accept traditional ideas, it “is not a sufficient reason for replacing them.” Here meaning is understood in terms of the original text and source, not in terms of its reception.

Childs and other supporters of canonical criticism have maintained that there must be a divine aspect present also in biblical theology. In his monograph *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (1992) Childs first studies the essential themes of the Old Testament tradition, and then moves on to New Testament texts.<sup>115</sup>

Already in an earlier writing Childs had criticized previous currents in biblical theology for their dependence on reductionist or anachronistic interpretations. Older movement “accepted uncritically the liberal hermeneutic presupposition that one came to the biblical text from a vantage point outside the text.” This is an argument that we have already met elsewhere. Adherents to the linguistic approach have noted that meanings in biblical theology should not be construed without the proper textual context. For Childs, this context is the canon because it fulfils the criteria both historically and in terms of religious tradition.<sup>116</sup> Childs also states that the historical-critical method as such is deficient and does not do “justice to the theological dimensions” of Scripture. In this respect, he shows “sensitivity to the faith communities that produced the Bible,” as Mead remarks.<sup>117</sup>

The very question about the canon of the Old Testament is interesting as such for Childs because, in many respects, the process ends with Ezra. Childs assumes that the relationship between history and tradition changed after the exile. New events were still interpreted at the time of the Second Temple, but they were usually read in terms of a “canonical” tradition. Childs says that this can already be seen in Daniel where critical judgments against Alexander and the Seleucids are provided. Simultaneous with this change, prophecy vanished from Israel.

Childs states that one of the main interests in New Testament theology is the preservation of Old testament beliefs and theological concepts. He speaks of a “shared reality,” according to which both the Old and New

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<sup>115</sup> Discussion about Childs’ theory is so extensive that it is not possible to assess it here in detail—a task like that would demand a monograph of its own. Childs is presented here as the inaugurator of the renewed wave of canonical criticism, and comments on his work will be cited only insofar as it is relevant for the present investigation. For a useful general overview, see Parsons, *Criticism and Interpretation*, 255–294.

<sup>116</sup> Childs, *Crisis*, 102, 106–107, 140–141. Barr criticizes Childs and prioritizes language over tradition: “The universe of meaning, within which the language of the biblical books operated, was never one circumscribed by the canon of scripture, which did not then exist.” Barr, *IDBSupp* (1976) 110. Here Barr, probably by mistake, relies on the semantical theory of primitive reference in order to oppose Childs. Elsewhere Barr usually supports new semantics.

<sup>117</sup> See Childs, *Reclaiming the Bible*, 9–15. Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 90.



Testaments are part of one and the same “redemptive drama” of election and reconciliation. They contain similar views on God, the covenant, and the people of God. Descriptions of the people of God are the same. Only the interpretation how God will distribute his salvation changes and develops.<sup>118</sup>

At the heart of the problem of Biblical Theology lies the issue of doing full justice to the subtle canonical relationship of the two testaments within the one Christian Bible. On the one hand, the Christian canon asserts the continuing integrity of the Old Testament witness. It must be heard on its own terms. The problem with traditional Christian allegory was its refusal to hear the Old Testament’s witness, and to change its semantic level in order to bring it into conformity with the New Testament. On the other hand, the New Testament makes its own witness. It tells its own story of the new redemptive intervention of God in Jesus Christ. The New Testament is not just an extension of the Old, nor a last chapter in an epic tale. Something totally new has entered in the gospel.<sup>119</sup>

The advantage of canonical reading is its ability to return certain obvious themes extant in the texts themselves to the study. Childs has been skillful in combining different, sometimes even rather simple but necessary theological motives and premises. In addition to studying particular texts he also reflects on biblical theology on a larger scale. Furthermore, he has provided chapters that dialogue with dogmatic tradition.<sup>120</sup>

Several New Testament theologies have been written in this vein, and some of them were mentioned already in the section on the resuscitation of biblical theology. Charles H.H. Scobie’s *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* belongs to the massive attempts to write a theology of both Old and New Testament. Childs approaches the issue from an Old Testament perspective, and Scobie presents his alternative from the New. He focuses on the canonical approach and is openly sensitive to faith communities—two issues essential for Childs as well. Scobie works with the standard framework of promise and fulfilment.

<sup>118</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 91–94, 105.

<sup>119</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 78. Räisänen comments only briefly on Childs and, in his opinion, Childs remains in the conservative camp: “In his attempt to unite Old Testament exegesis and New Testament exegesis not only with each other but also with systematic theology, Childs does perceive many questions sharply, but he is content with traditional answers.” Räisänen, *Beyond 2nd ed.*, 120. The main point in his criticism is, once more, that Childs does not acknowledge essential diversity but, traditional dogmatics “wins out” every time.

<sup>120</sup> For the doctrinal treatment, see for instance Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 533.



The treatment of the materials is thematic: he focuses on themes such as God's order and God's servant.<sup>121</sup>

In the United States, canonical reading has become rather popular. For instance Frank Thielman has in his *New Testament Theology: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (2005) taken Childs' ideas further. Thielman actually contrasts canonical reading and the above-mentioned history-of-religion approach. He says that Räisänen may be right that the canonical reading is usually based on a conviction in Christian faith. Were one to write just a historical description, one would have to deal with a Jewish history of religion. Canonical reading, however, holds New Testament writings primary because it believes that these writings possess a special authority when they speak of God.

The canonicity of certain texts has no meaning for the historian of early Christianity until the authoritative status of the canonical texts themselves becomes important for early Christianity. At that point, however, the historian's interest shifts from the historical context in which the texts were first produced and read to the history of their influence as authoritative Scripture.<sup>122</sup>

Despite this, Thielman remarks that it is impossible to separate historical and theological approaches completely. Every historian like every theologian must make a reconstruction based on the material. What differs is the value that is given to the theological content. Scholars writing in the history-of-religion tradition assess texts in quite another manner, which gives them a different kind of meaning than one gleaned from a theological reading. This is where canonical reading has its special role. Thielman states that it can understand the prophetic voice of the text and find the message the writings have even for a modern society and community.

Thomas Schreiner also belongs to the school of canonical reading with his monograph *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (2008). Schreiner says he first worked only with the New Testament texts in order to make certain that the material he collected was text-centered enough. Only later did he start reading secondary literature. The key term in Schreiner's work is promise. He organized his work almost like a dogmatic textbook. He starts with evident basic themes that always need to be taken

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<sup>121</sup> For Scobie's detailed treatment of the question concerning the role of the canon, see Scobie, *Ways*, 49–75.

<sup>122</sup> Thielman, *New Testament Theology*, 28.

into consideration when theology is defined. In one way or another, most books speak about the promises God has made in the Old Testament. Then their fulfillment is described in detail. Even apart from hermeneutical theories, salvation history reaches its summit in the New Testament. Even though this may sound simplistic it must not be neglected. Furthermore, such a view is quite easy to confirm with textual evidence.

We understand each of the pieces in the NT by our understanding of the whole, by our worldview, by our metanarrative. We can fall into the illusion that if we study a “part,” then we are dealing with just the “evidence,” “the hard phenomena” of the text. But our understanding of any piece of evidence is also affected by our standpoint, our worldview. We do not assess any piece of evidence from a neutral and objective standpoint. Hence, there is a dialogue between the inductive and deductive that constantly occurs.<sup>123</sup>

New Testament writers have been convinced that the God of the Old Testament works amidst fallen humanity. This is the point of departure that Schreiner chooses, and it also helps him compose his table of contents for the work.<sup>124</sup> First he studies the nature of God’s promises in the context of a canonical reading. Then the main part of the work comprises themes such as soteriology, Christology and pneumatology. Even though Schreiner does not try to detect only one theme that could explain the material, he does lift one theme above the others: Magnifying God in Christ.<sup>125</sup>

One should note, however, that there are at least two completely different readings of the canonical approach in Western scholarship. In Germany the professor emeritus Ulrich Wilckens is writing an extensive work that will in its final form contain three different parts and more than six separate volumes, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*.<sup>126</sup> Wilckens differs from the history-of-religion approach with his emphasis on canonical theology. This does not, however, make him a follower of Childs.

<sup>123</sup> Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 11.

<sup>124</sup> J. Julius Scott Jr. continues in a similar vein. Like Caird before him, he focuses on the main themes of theology in his *New Testament Theology: A New Study of the Thematic Structure of the New Testament* (2008). As the title reveals, his monograph focuses on the basic structure of the content. Scott presents a dogmatic “thematic structure” of the Christian message. His themes comprise God and Jesus, salvation, sanctification, Church, mission, and eschatology.

<sup>125</sup> “It is illuminating to consider NT Theology from a twofold perspective. First, God’s purpose in all that he does is to bring honor to himself and to Jesus Christ. The NT is radically God-centered. We could say that the NT is about God magnifying himself in Christ through the Spirit.” Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 13.

<sup>126</sup> Two parts and six volumes of Wilckens’ work are available today, published during 2002–2009, and these contain the most important material for New Testament theology.

Instead, Wilckens follows German traditions and the ideas of the historical-critical movement. He is openly Bultmannian but he does not rely on the Gnostic theory. Neither does he explain the sacraments by referring to Hellenistic mystery religions. In this respect, Wilckens provides a reconstructed Bultmannian version of New Testament theology. What is new is that Wilckens wishes to solve the problem of unity and diversity in terms of the canon itself.<sup>127</sup>

Many of the premises Wilckens has adopted come from the early period of historical-critical study. He does start with Jesus' proclamation but concerning the historical Jesus, he stays with the standard approach that uses the criterion of dissimilarity. According to Wilckens, Jesus' own proclamation was not messianic ("unmessianisch") in that he did not claim to be a messiah himself. Instead, Jesus preached the Kingdom of God ("die Königsherrschaft Gottes") and remained within the Jewish theocratic world view.<sup>128</sup> For Wilckens, all Gospel material is already a post-Easter theological construction. Thus Wilckens, despite his canonical point of departure, reinstates Bultmannian kerygmatic theology. Like the Göttingen Bultmannians above, Wilckens makes the event of Jesus' resurrection the center of New Testament theology. For him, it is a fact and reality ("Wirklichkeit") on which biblical teaching focuses.<sup>129</sup> This is why it must also be the basis ("das Fundament") for the church's faith and life.<sup>130</sup> Even though Wilckens has attempted to correct the faults of Bultmann's *Theologie*, he stays within the basic Bultmannian contours. For Wilckens the story of the "history" (Geschichte) of Jesus cannot be separated from the history of the church. This is how he distances himself from the problems that the historical-critical approach has raised. For him, the Jesus of biblical theology is—and must be—the "Christ of faith," just as the Bultmannian tradition has claimed. This, of course, is standard kerygmatic theology.<sup>131</sup>

We started the present chapter by recognizing two quite separate traditions of interpretation in the history of biblical theology. Those supporting historical-critical study are reluctant to take "transcendence" into account in their "historical" theology. It is accurate to say that the attitude toward "transcendence" is what separates scholars. Certain writers

<sup>127</sup> Wilckens, *Theologie* I.1, 47–53; II.1, 15–20. Cf., Rowe, *JBL* 125 (2006) 396–397.

<sup>128</sup> Wilckens, *Theologie* I.1, 31, 136–138.

<sup>129</sup> Wilckens, *Theologie* I.1, 29–30; I.2, 124–133.

<sup>130</sup> Wilckens, *Theologie* I.2, 124; II.1, 207–212.

<sup>131</sup> Wilckens, *Theologie* I.2, 196; II.1, 212–213; II.2, 9–11.

have maintained an openness to the divine in their interpretation: the Bible presents truth claims about God, human beings, and our world. One should remember, however, that this kind of black-and-white dichotomy, promoted for instance by Barr, has never corresponded to reality. Bultmann and those demanding the strictest possible demythologizing of the New Testament, have simultaneously almost blindly believed in *kerygma*, God's divine address. For a long time, the historical-critical paradox was solved by Hegelian ontology, even though it never produced any consistent systems or patterns of interpretation. Existentialist tradition has been very open to transcendence, and the same is true about nearly all theories apart from the death-of-God movement.

In fact, Räisänen belongs to the few scholars who really have adopted sociological reductionism in the sense of denying metaphysics. Even Berger never went so far. In this sense, the history of biblical criticism has often been presented and explained in a slightly erroneous perspective. Räisänen probably wished to correct the faults of previous scholarship, as we have suggested, by taking the extreme path of immanent interpretation. Before moving to his Wredean theory, however, we need to consider the linguistic alternative in more detail.

### 6.5. *On Narrative Theology*

Earlier we acknowledged the linguistic turn that changed the reading of texts during the twentieth century. From this arose the narratological and rhetorical study of the Bible. In this new context New Testament theology, too, underwent changes that gave completely new structuralist approaches to theological construction.<sup>132</sup> Narrative theology as a term has been used before but, before the linguistic shift, it implied a descriptive presentation of certain texts and their main ideas. According to the new linguistics, however, scholars must focus on signification processes. The basic point of departure is in the notion that our understanding of reality and the construction of knowledge has narratological features. It is quite easy to note that in the New Testament the mode of presentation is one of narration. Be it Christology or soteriology, a narrative

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<sup>132</sup> In the sphere of historicism, the narrative approach has also been interpreted as a shift from history to story, consolidating thus the dichotomy between "real" history and ecclesial faith. This, however, is merely a curiosity in the current itself. See discussion below.

analysis helps scholars to detect meanings and signification processes in New Testament theology.

In the Catholic tradition Frank Matera still uses terms borrowed from Käsemann and Dunn in the title of his *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity* (2007). One must note, however, that unlike Gnllka, Matera focuses on narratives when developing a canonical reading. His construction deliberately aims at the “unity” part of the task he sets for himself.

New Testament theology, then, should seek to provide a theological interpretation of the New Testament that integrates and relates the diverse theologies of the New Testament into a unified whole without harmonizing them, as elusive as that task may be.<sup>133</sup>

Matera’s approach is mostly literary. The writer of a (postliberal) New Testament theology must focus on implied narratives: “One way to achieve this goal would be to take into account the implied narrative that underlies what the New Testament writings claim about Israel, Jesus, and the church. Such an approach would allow New Testament theology to communicate what the New Testament writings say about God through the narratives they tell or presuppose.” (ibid.)

Matera has even proposed a five point definition for the metanarrative that directs New Testament teaching. He believes that it reveals the basic unity of the theological content of the texts.

I make use of five categories to summarize the master story of the New Testament: (1) humanity in need of salvation, (2) the bringer of salvation, (3) the community of the sanctified, (4) the life of the sanctified, and (5) the hope of the sanctified. These themes correspond to the theological categories of (1) Christian anthropology and soteriology, (2) Christology, (3) ecclesiology, (4) ethics, and (5) eschatology, but they are not intended as a theological straightjacket to control the “unruly theology” of the New Testament.<sup>134</sup>

The master story is the key term for Matera. “This master story and the experience of salvation to which it witnesses provide the foundation for the unity of New Testament theology.” (ibid.) Metanarrative itself is not derived from different particular texts, though. Instead, its details depend on abstract concepts that comprise: the need for salvation, the bringer of salvation, the community of the sanctified, and the hope of the sanctified. The unity in the midst of the diversity present in particular books,

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<sup>133</sup> Matera, *New Testament Theology*, xxvii.

<sup>134</sup> Matera, *New Testament Theology*, xxx.

for Matera, can be secured on the basis of the master story. Even though details vary and different New Testament writings present the metanarrative differently, the narrative itself remains the same.

Literary methods also play a significant role in N.T. Wright's huge project called *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. Like Hübner, Hahn, and Wilckens, Wright has set out to write a comprehensive treatment of New Testament theology, extending to several thousand pages. The important volume on Jesus' teaching, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, was published in 1997. Following E.P. Sanders's eschatological interpretation Wright applies narratology in explaining the theological stories of the New Testament. In the first volume *The New Testament and the People of God* Wright had already provided the foundation for his theory of reading New Testament theology. He adopts views from structuralism and especially the narrative structure theory developed by A.J. Greimas. He connects these structuralist ideas to communication theory and narratology. On this basis Wright assesses metanarratives that can explain larger theological entities.<sup>135</sup>

Our task, therefore, throughout this entire project, will involve the discernment and analysis, at one level or another, of first-century stories and their implications. Stories, both in the shape and in the manner of their telling, are the crucial agents that invest "events" with "meaning." The way the bare physical facts are described, the point at which tension or climax occurs, the selection and arrangement—all these indicate the meaning which the event is believed to possess.<sup>136</sup>

Wright is convinced that a narrative intention directs the construction of particular texts. Therefore, it can be held as a key for their interpretation. He appears to agree with those cognitive theories that assume that narrativity is an essential way human beings conceive reality. Hence for Wright, narratology does not oppose historical study, but it should rather be seen as a part of its methodology.

The task of the historian is not simply to assemble little clumps of "facts" and hope that somebody else will integrate them. The historian's job is to show their interconnectedness, that is, how one thing follows from another, precisely by examining the "inside" of the events. And the model for such connections is not simply that of random atoms cannoning into another. It is that of the interplay of fully human life—the complex network of human aims, intentions and motivations, operating within and at the edges of the worldviews of different communities and the mindsets of different

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<sup>135</sup> Wright, *People of God*, 70f.

<sup>136</sup> Wright, *People of God*, 79.

individuals. To display this, the historian needs (it will come as no surprise) to tell a story.<sup>137</sup>

Metanarratives comprise a view of continuing exile, as well as Jesus' eschatological program. Wright is a key scholar in the "new perspective on Jesus" movement and he holds that Jesus' teaching can best be explained in the context of the hopes of Israel's restoration. Like Israel's great prophets before him, Jesus proclaims that the people still lives under the punishments of the exile. God will answer their agony by sending the son of David. When this messianic figure enters Jerusalem, he will found a new temple, the temple of salvation. As this happens, Israel will be forgiven and people will find *huiiothesia*, they will extol God in the power of the Holy Spirit as his children.

This basic setting is similar to Ben Witherington's two-volume work *The Indelible Image: The Theological and Ethical Thought World of the New Testament*. Witherington did apply narratology to Paul's theology in his *Paul's Narrative Thought World* (1994). He describes Paul's theology as a process from creation and the fall up to redemption and eternal life. This metanarrative directs all individual details in his theology. It provides meaning to Christology and soteriology. This kind of approach is also featured in the first volume of the new work, *The Individual Witnesses* (2009). Witherington states that New Testament texts are essentially theological. They describe God who reveals himself to people in a certain time and place. There is also a deliberate intention in these texts. They aim at communication, and this is why the texts and their message cannot be interpreted separately from these intentions. Since New Testament story both in the Gospels and in Christology has a narrative structure, theology must be assessed in its terms.<sup>138</sup>

Witherington starts his theology with the teaching of the historical Jesus. He affirms the same idea as Wright: the gospel of God's kingdom expresses an answer to Israel's expectation of restoration. Jesus appears as the builder of an eschatological temple, and he gathers himself a congregation of believers. He promises that the Holy Spirit will live in these believers. Such themes also direct Paul's message and the teaching in the apostolic letters, even though some details change. Like several other

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<sup>137</sup> Wright, *People of God*, 113. As Via notes, this is one of the issues where the difference with an existentialist reading becomes evident: "For Bultmann the category for connecting the New Testament to the contemporary situation is an understanding of existence, while for Wright the category is story." Via, *Theology*, 84.

<sup>138</sup> Witherington, *Individual Witness*, 41–43.



New Testament theologies, Witherington's proceeds in the first volume by treating the theology of Jesus, Paul, John, the Letter to the Hebrews, and different Gospel writers separately.

The second volume *The Collective Witness* (2010) brings up a more systematic, "collective" approach, as he says. Witherington borrows the methodology of a symbolic universe, but he applies it to structuralism. In this he differs from Räisänen, who uses the concept in a Weberian sense in his sociological theory. For Witherington, the idea of a symbolic universe means established conceptions according to which people arrange their narrative thought world.

When I talk about a symbolic universe, I am referring to the fixed furniture in our mind from which we furnish our narrative thought world. Concepts such as God, sin, salvation, Israel, faith, heaven, hell, love, forgiveness, adultery, and truth, are examples of the mental furniture to which I am referring. I am specifically interested in the theological and ethical part of the mental furniture, not all parts of it.<sup>139</sup>

In the context of narratology the treatment of collective symbols belongs to the area of language and linguistic structures. It does not imply any philosophy-of-religion premises or epistemological speculation about the rational or theological truth of these symbols.<sup>140</sup> As a theologian, Witherington apparently believes in the truth claims of these propositions, as did Thielman above. Furthermore, Witherington emphasizes the narratological approach by quoting Matera: "The unity of New Testament theology is grounded in the implied master story to which these texts witness."<sup>141</sup> The unity of the symbolic universe thus, for Witherington, is partly also a result of the fact to which Childs referred to earlier: the concepts of the New Testament are completely dependent on Old Testament themes and *topoi*. This is also made explicit in the New Testament in detail.

Narrative theology of the New Testament is then explicated in Witherington's two volumes by discussing each theme separately: the questions about God, Christology, and soteriology. This results in a systematic overview of the content of biblical theology. Furthermore, Witherington expands his treatment by dealing with the ethical views the texts bring up.

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<sup>139</sup> Witherington, *Collective Witness*, 59.

<sup>140</sup> Witherington, *Collective Witness*, 38.

<sup>141</sup> Witherington, *Collective Witness*, 101.



The theological content is thus accompanied by moral theology, which was Witherington's aspiration from the very start.

It is clear that the linguistic shift has renewed the readings of New Testament theology. Narrative theology, however, is not a completely unified field. It has been applied to standard historicism where narrative reading is believed to mark a shift from "history to story," as the slogan states. Interest in the textual world is seen as a kind of escapism that attempts to save the remnants of theology from the hands of historical criticism. This theoretical question is so important that it needs to be discussed in detail below, in subchapter 7.7.<sup>142</sup>

There are also different readings among the various structuralist schools. Some scholars choose to focus on narrative structure and metanarratives, while others investigate semiotic features in the texts. The significance of social context is important to some scholars but others wish to keep the readings textual. Rhetoric and rhetorical narratology could apparently be used even more than it has been thus far. One can assume that the growing interest in linguistic methods in the sphere of New Testament studies will gradually stretch the approaches even beyond what we see today.

#### 6.6. *History-of-Religion Approach: The Legacy of Wrede*

In many respects, Räisänen's approach to the method of writing a so-called New Testament theology differs from all of the above-mentioned alternatives. He has learned much from Bultmann, as we have maintained above, but on this issue he does not follow him. He writes quite unlike the recent Bultmannians who have been writing lengthy New Testament theologies. Furthermore, he does speak about cultural symbols, but nothing along the lines of recent writers' narratology. In order to define Räisänen's basic method for a New Testament theology, or rather a history of early Christian religion that wishes to replace the former, we need to investigate his challenging writings on the issue.

Reading Räisänen's *Authority*, as we have done throughout this entire study, proves that all his life he has aimed at investigating the "panorama of natural religion" as he calls it. Theology as such has not been part of the project. His interest is in personal experience and the development of tradition. These principles also direct his understanding of the "new"

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<sup>142</sup> See especially Collins, *Hebrew Bible*, 9–12. His ideas are discussed in 7.7.

history-of-religion approach to early Christian thought. In practice, this naturally means that Räisänen, like Barr, Rowland, and Theissen, wants to apply the Krüger-Wrede religio-historical program to the study of New Testament texts. The point of departure perforce dictates certain premises that change the more traditional investigation of New Testament theology. According to the theory, personal or at least local forms of interpretation must take precedence over general doctrines, and multifarious religious thinking must predominate over canonical unity. As Räisänen starts to formulate his hermeneutical program concerning the history of early Christian religion, these ideals are given a theoretical justification.

If we are to believe Räisänen there are only two main alternatives to approaching New Testament texts and dealing with their content. In his *Beyond* Räisänen states that a choice must be made. One either takes the “Gablerian” path and makes a distinction between historical theology and a dogmatic system, or one follows Wrede and dissolves the system of doctrines by focusing more broadly on religious phenomena. Räisänen claims to choose Wrede, even though he admits that Gabler’s historical task—in the sense Räisänen himself understands it—is justified.<sup>143</sup> What he vehemently denies is the Gablerian effort to create a dogmatic system. It is no exaggeration to say that by reducing methodological possibilities to these two alternatives he has been attempting to shift the paradigm for several decades. In his project he is not alone, as we shall see, since Rowland and Theissen have also used sociological methods to explain the growth of early Christianity and especially its thought world.<sup>144</sup>

Räisänen’s basic point of departure in constructing his theory is not clear, however. He does seem to follow Wrede, and he holds Wrede’s theory in high esteem but, for some reason, he simultaneously keeps his distance from Wrede’s original ideas and wishes to formulate his own theory. This problem is so essential that it deserves a closer investigation.

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<sup>143</sup> See the analysis above, in 7.1.

<sup>144</sup> Literally taken Räisänen thus accepts no other way to treat New Testament religion than historically—be it Gablerian or Wredean. In this respect his approach is quite polarizing. See Räisänen, *Beyond*, 13–18. The discussion about the sociological approach has been alive since the 1980s. Christopher Rowland in his *Christian Origins* (1987) has applied a sociologically motivated history-of-religion method to the interpretation of the New Testament. Unlike Räisänen, Rowland is interested in narrow contexts and more plausible social phenomena, not in theological currents. This is why his investigation belongs more clearly to the sphere of history of religion. His approach differs from Theissen’s, but the latter has such individual features that his theory needs to be discussed later in a subchapter of its own. Rowland, *Christian Origins*, xiv–xv.

Superficially, Räisänen seems to accept Wrede's history-of-religion approach and subscribes to this tradition.

Wrede admits that a 'New Testament theology' understood in his way in no respect differs from a history of religion. This fact, however, he does not regard as a weakness but as an advantage. A specifically theological type of treatment would amount to a mere disturbance, in that it would result in a mixture of the personal view of the scholar with the object of research (70). Thus, the traditional name of the discipline is wrong in both its terms. It is not a question of *New Testament* theology, since the subject-matter covers all chronologically relevant material. Nor is *theology* alone the studied object, but rather religion. The appropriate name would then be either '*early Christian history of religion*' or—in view of such terms of 'theology' as do occur, in Paul at least—'the history of early Christian religion and theology' (116).<sup>145</sup>

In his *Beyond* Räisänen thus adopts only Wrede's basic dichotomy and uses abstractions that justify his categories. He has no interest in any dogmatic tradition. Instead, he speculates on Gabler's historical theology—in opposition to dogmatics—and Wredean history-of-religion. The only alternatives Räisänen accepts are Gabler's *true* ("faktisch") biblical theology—the historical approach as opposed to the normative, as he understands it—and Wrede's more general study of religion. He has already dismissed other options by this time. The real distinction, according to Räisänen, concerns one's assessment of the New Testament. Is it a document of theology or religion? His answer: scholars should investigate only religious phenomena, not subjective literary constructions and convictions that can be labelled as theology.<sup>146</sup>

This is how Räisänen abandons "theology" in New Testament theology research. Should one speak of the symbolic world's center or focus, one will always end up with a normative approach, a normative writing of history—and normative, in Räisänen's opinion, would be unscientific. Furthermore, any references to historical theology or biblical theology will

<sup>145</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 16. He makes references to Wrede's article "The Tasks and Method of 'New Testament Theology';" printed in Morgan, *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, 68–116. For a general overview on Wrede's ideas, see Stuhlmacher, *Hermeneutik*, 165.

<sup>146</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond 2nd ed.*, 11, 21, cf. Räisänen, *TAik* 93 (1988) 318–319. Terminology creates certain problems here. As we saw above, Räisänen supposes that Gabler speaks of *true* (faktisch) historical theology which presupposes real or true historical study. This Räisänen makes a counterpoint to *pure* New Testament theology that serves dogmatics. The dichotomy comes from Räisänen's pen. Gabler probably did say that one should separate the time-bound material from pure theology, but this was not a "historical" task of biblical theology.

produce a similar result, even if they be made without a dogmatic point of departure. Räisänen states that focusing on biblical theology unavoidably means that the approach itself is religious. For Räisänen, there can be no large theological structure in a religion. Why this is so remains to be seen later. All we can say here is that he apparently sees religion as an uncontrolled phenomenon where all structures are “aetiological”.<sup>147</sup>

But how should one understand the difference between Gabler and Wrede? Räisänen has adopted Wrede’s approach and even borrowed the title history-of-religion from him. Problems arise when one asks—with Räisänen—whether investigation should focus on the history of ideas. The setting is not completely clear because Räisänen is well aware of the fact that, for Wrede, religious thought as such, as theology proper, should *not* be the object of study.

Of the several components that make up a religion, the intellectual or theological one is only one among several. It is this side of the Christian religion—religious thought or the intellectual content of faith—that has been the focus of “New Testament theology.” Wrede protested against this feature, too, in the traditional way of conceiving the task: the history of early Christian religion was to study the life of the believers rather than theology. Liberal and history-of-religions scholars were well aware that religious thought is only one relatively small, part of a religion. They emphasized the religious experiences reflected in the texts; “theology” was nothing but a set of conceptual interpretations of pre-theological experience.<sup>148</sup>

Räisänen accepts these insights but searches for a synthesis. “Yet I am personally still inclined to maintain some continuity with traditional ‘New Testament theology’ in focusing on a discussion of religious *thought* in Early Christianity.”<sup>149</sup> This, consistent and logical as it sounds, creates immediate problems for his theory. An ambivalence between the study of religion and the investigation of theological thought leaves too much room for deliberate eclecticism. One side can be emphasized at the cost

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<sup>147</sup> Räisänen writes that anyone adopting the comparative religion approach must abandon his previous claims about the absoluteness concerning any particular religion. Since other religions claim absolute status as well, in research it cannot be granted to any of them. Räisänen, *TAik* 102 (1997) 121. For Räisänen, this is the method biblical studies should follow.

<sup>148</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 104–105. Scobie calls Wrede’s theology “independent Biblical Theology,” and Carson in his own survey clarifies this: “that is, independent of any acknowledged Christian dogmatic presuppositions, or any concern to seek out what is normative or even helpful for the Christian church.” Scobie, *TyndB* 42 (1991) 39; Carson, *BBR* 5 (1995) 23.

<sup>149</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 105.

of the other—and Räsänen is free to oscillate between the poles as he wishes. It is quite apparent why the door to *religious thought* has been left open. This enables him to use the work of historical-critical investigation in his hermeneutics. Should he really choose to follow Wrede, he would have to settle for a more general science-of-religion type of analysis.<sup>150</sup>

So it appears that Räsänen prefers Gabler to Wrede after all. Certain of Wrede's ideas have been useful but, ultimately Räsänen holds that Wrede has not given proper significance to historical investigation. According to Räsänen, Gabler invented the term "true (faktisch) biblical theology" and Räsänen spends much time in showing how Wrede's own historical investigation already follows Gabler's ideas. In the Finnish preliminary versions of the *Beyond* Räsänen speaks of Wrede's own "*faktisch* New Testament theology." In the *Beyond*, then, he claims that Wrede was already on his way to this *faktisch* direction: "Wrede, then, was moving toward Gabler's 'true New Testament theology' in a splendid way."<sup>151</sup>

Räsänen's interest lies in historical investigation.<sup>152</sup> He is convinced that any treatment of the Bible needs the help of the historical-critical method—whatever that then may be, as we recall the discussion concerning the problems of the methodology in chapter 2, and Räsänen's own limited interest in applying the standard methods in the area of Paul or New Testament theology. The essential criterion that Räsänen mentions even in his last publications is the Reimarian notion of "contradiction."<sup>153</sup> Historical critical investigation of theological themes is constantly dependent on Käsemann's theses, which became so vital for Räsänen's own approach. It is hard to avoid the impression, which some scholars have expressed openly, that Räsänen's horizon here is quite narrow.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> In this case, in my opinion, Balla remains too cautious when remarking merely that: "I think it is Wrede who has set out in the most consistent way the programme Räsänen is arguing for." Balla, *Challenges*, 10. Despite the fact that Räsänen refers to Wrede and exploits his history-of-religion ambitions, Räsänen's theory differs essentially from that of Wrede's.

<sup>151</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 93 (1988) 324; Räsänen, *Beyond*, 17.

<sup>152</sup> In this respect Mead is right in remarking that Räsänen chooses Gabler because the latter separated historical tasks from theological ones. Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 84. Gabler, as we saw, is not the most fitting precursor, though, because he believed in universal truths and thought that historical study should support New Testament theology's dogmatic task.

<sup>153</sup> See especially Räsänen, *Challenges*, 229: "The New Testament has turned out to be filled with theological contradictions, many of them by no means peripheral."

<sup>154</sup> So Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, 142–143. "The very word 'contradiction,' however, betrays the narrowness of the horizon of a writer who appears to work largely within a single discipline (*historical* and phenomenological biblical-critical scholarship)

The only problem here is that Gabler never developed a historical theology in the sense Räsänen describes it. For Gabler, time-bound material did not represent theology at all. Biblical theology, for Gabler, was to be found in the universally true, atemporal statements that the historical analysis can detect in the Bible. This is quite the opposite of what Räsänen himself wishes to do. Therefore, Räsänen's hermeneutical theory concerning historical theology must be considered his own construction. As we have seen, it is based on a historical-critical view on the Bible and draws on Wrede, no doubt. The only surprising detail here is that Räsänen does not accept Wrede's history-of religion-approach entirely because he wants to concentrate on religious thought. As a result, Räsänen follows neither Gabler nor Wrede—despite the extensive treatment of both of these scholars' texts.<sup>155</sup>

There is one aspect, however, where Räsänen's view could be considered parallel to that of Gabler. Gabler wished to cleanse "pure" idealist theology of any historical features, and one can say that in some sense Räsänen was able to develop this part of the "historical (critical) investigation" process. Opposed to this is the area of dogmatics that, according to Gabler, is subject to the human intellect and its ever changing imagination. This, in turn, sounds very much like the idea of constant change in new contexts. One early form of Räsänen's chain of interpretation can thus, if one wishes to do so, be seen in Gabler's idea of the culturally dependent development of dogmatics during the centuries after the formation of the canon. In Räsänen's hermeneutics the polarization is more severe, though. In his view, historical-critical analysis destroys the possibility of any "pure" theology. Furthermore, he contests the idealist view of pure doctrines. Therefore, the only alternative, for Räsänen, is to build on the analysis of doctrinal imagination.

There is another point where Räsänen's consistency stumbles as he adopts Wredean ideas into his hermeneutics. With his predecessor, Räsänen states that the "boundaries of canon" must not be allowed to limit the investigation of early Christian religion. This, too, is a Wredean principle.<sup>156</sup> Canon—as a late construction—cannot restrict the exploration

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and seems unable to explore whether the biblical canon might be other than monologic discourse, intended as third-person, nonparticipatory utterance, capable of being mediated by, or reduced to, the scope of a single mind."

<sup>155</sup> This mistake is quite commonly made. Rowe, for instance, speaks of the "basic Gable-rian conviction that NTT must deal with the NT historically." Rowe, *JBL* 125 (2006) 407.

<sup>156</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, 13; referring to Wrede himself.

of all the possible material and views existing when Christian religion was emerging. Religion, for Räsänen, is a wider phenomenon than the documents that later come to define it allow for. This view, being a very substantial principle in his theory, is somewhat inconsistent with the previous one, i.e. the study of the religious phenomenon itself.

The difficulty is quite simple: if the canon must be abandoned especially for the sake of safeguarding the sufficient breadth of investigation, why should one focus on religious thought and “theology,” which are inevitably bound up with the very canon itself? This is an important question, and it has led some scholars oppose Räsänen’s views, as we shall see later. Wrede was more consistent in this question since he concluded that this kind of approach must focus entirely on general religious phenomena. The discussion concerning doctrines was almost prohibited in his hermeneutics. The practical problems with such a contradiction will become evident when details in Räsänen’s *Rise* will be investigated later.

The basic problem with this view is that, after abandoning the canon, Räsänen should investigate and emphasize non-canonical Christian texts. Any historian would be interested in precisely that. Second Temple Jewish writings, however, are not very helpful here because they represent a distinctively different religious identity. Räsänen is not able to argue for his diversity thesis on the basis of extant documents. All he can do is to make inferences by referring to form critical and tradition critical reconstructions—all of which are made by working with canonical texts. As a result, the history of early Christian religion is not based on primary evidence (documents) but on hypotheses that often run up against the factual information provided by the extant documents. This is an important methodological issue and we shall return to it a little later.<sup>157</sup>

Apart from these two quite problematic issues it is worth noting that Räsänen, in his *Beyond*, does use other undoubtedly Wredean principles—at least in a Weberian sense. In his sociology of religion Räsänen interprets religion as a cultural phenomenon. He uses two principles that are best explained by Weber’s sociology. Firstly, academic New Testament theology must serve society, not any particular church. Secondly, the approach must be one of sociology.<sup>158</sup>

<sup>157</sup> See subchapter 6.7. below.

<sup>158</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond 2nd ed.*, 22, 151f.; cf. Räsänen, *TAik* 93 (1988) 329; Räsänen, *TAik* 93 (1988) 470. This is related to Fowl’s idea, linking Wrede and Weber on a more general level: “My point is not to argue about causal relationships between Wrede and Weber. Rather, I wish to note that given the time when biblical theology became a form of academic



The first of these principles is entirely Weberian in the sense Berger—and also Räsänen—has interpreted it. Räsänen maintains that biblical scholarship cannot try to serve a particular church in one individual country. “Wrede noted that no biblical scholar can serve merely the Church even if he [or she] would want to.” Räsänen accepts this view with some “minor corrections.” This is where he says: “So I choose the society.” Such hermeneutics is based on the conviction that religion, in principle, is part of culture itself. The developments of culture must be seen as developments in reinterpreting religion.<sup>159</sup>

This view, however, has problems within the original Wredean reading. Räsänen’s sociological treatment of New Testament material leads inevitably to reductionist results. His method has the problems that we have discussed in the previous chapters: by making a Weberian interpretation of Wrede’s history-of-religion method, Räsänen gets in a situation where the object of study—despite the grand plan Wrede put forth—is not religion but culture. Sociological hermeneutics turns the history of religion into a history of ideas where theological issues are treated in terms of *Sachkritik* (a critique of content), and value judgments begin to influence the interpretation of doctrines. It must be noted that such criticism is one-sided. *Sachkritik* is seldom—if ever—applied to religious behavior, rites and cults.

The second of the above-mentioned principles is as simple as it is obvious. As we have seen, the methodological basis for Räsänen’s theory has been taken from Berger and Luckmann and their sociology of knowledge theory.<sup>160</sup> Since traditional New Testament theology is to be replaced, the discipline needs the help of Weberian sociology of religion. Therefore Räsänen’s “history” means investigation of *religion*—not the canonical tradition.

This is also what Räsänen states in a crucial passage of the *Beyond*. In the second edition he quotes Wrede, who states that a proper history-of-religion study must aspire to understand the very nature of religion itself. Here we find Räsänen’s crucial theoretical point of departure.

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discourse whose tasks are initially articulated by Gabler and more firmly established by Wrede, it is not surprising that it reproduces many of the intellectual practices of the modern university.” Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 17.

<sup>159</sup> Räsänen, *TAik* 93 (1988) 465.

<sup>160</sup> The main treatment can be found in Räsänen, *Beyond*, 124–126. Even though Räsänen expresses a few more reservations towards Berger’s theory in the second edition of his book, he still admits that the sociology-of-religion approach is basically valid. Räsänen, *Beyond* 2nd ed., 192–195.



Thus, the traditional name of the discipline is wrong in both its terms. It is not a question of *New Testament* theology, since the subject-matter covers all chronologically relevant material. *Nor is theology alone the studied object, but rather religion.*<sup>161</sup>

In this kind of situation, studying texts transforms into investigating human religiosity. Furthermore, this explains why Wredean history-of-religion inevitably leads to a kind of psycho-pathology of religion. In the history-of-religion school, a scholar must be an expert in interpreting religious behavior, not necessarily a professional investigator of ancient texts. This, once again, is a feature that unites Räisänen and Bultmann.

In this theory, the basic dichotomy as well as inner contradictions remain. Räisänen's approach adopts a historicist's intention. One must remember that, as Räisänen himself often reminds his reader, his own development of the hermeneutical process was already established in his early book *Das koranische Jesusbild* (1971). He speaks about the triad of tradition, experience, and (re)interpretation and maintains that, even without the context of the sociology of knowledge, it can be found in the book's epilogue.<sup>162</sup>

This is how the true (*faktisch*) historical theology—which in Räisänen's work is constantly identified as historical-critical investigation—is united with Weberian sociology of religion. In his hermeneutics Räisänen has chosen to call it a "Wredean" approach. The apparent contradiction is a result of the fact that Räisänen does not investigate merely *religion* but also history and theological ideas. This inconsistency in Räisänen's theory will later be used as an explanatory factor for the peculiar detail that Räisänen, in his *Rise*, focuses on dogmatic categories (*loci*) instead of investigating more general and diverse religious phenomena.<sup>163</sup>

In his later book *Neutestamentliche Theologie?* Räisänen then provides a more thorough explanation for the line he has chosen. As he discusses the nature of different approaches to the science of religion (Religionswissenschaft) he assumes that the field can be split in two. On the one hand, there are the transcendentalists (Transzendentalisten) who assume that religions can have a metaphysical foundation. And on the other, there are the empiricists (Empiristen) who claim that speaking of religion as

<sup>161</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 16; my italics. The New Testament "is a document, not of theology, but of religion." *Beyond*, 14.

<sup>162</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 2 (1997) 122. We have earlier noted that the very same principles are then important in Räisänen's book *The Idea of Divine Hardening*.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. Räisänen, *Beyond* 2nd ed., 192–195.

such (*die Religion*) is considered as mere metaphysical abstraction. Without any discussion, the latter argument is held to be scientifically valid.<sup>164</sup> Consistent with his history-of-religion approach, Räsänen states that his sympathies lie on the side of the empiricists.<sup>165</sup>

With these premises in mind we must next turn to Räsänen's treatment of New Testament theology scholarship. In his *Beyond* he assesses all the main monographs on New Testament theology published in the mid-twentieth century on and, as expected, mostly in a negative sense. He classifies all the approaches according to his own dichotomy and criticizes all those theologies that have chosen the way of "pure" theology in one sense or another. This is where the weakness of his analysis becomes evident. Based on his strict theory Räsänen is destined to treat former projects in a black-and-white manner.

After writing his analysis, he learned that, during the 1990s and even the following decade, there have been dozens of new publications written on the subject. Many of these are discussed in the second edition of his book, and he gives a thorough analysis of the recent literature in his essay "What's Happening in New Testament theology?"<sup>166</sup> One is entitled to say that Räsänen has been very focused in proposing a sociological alternative for traditional New Testament theologies.

One could ask, of course, whether limiting the proper interpretation of New Testament theology to one dichotomy is justified? Räsänen apparently finds no value in traditional approaches. Theology, the content itself, cannot be investigated as it is—and if it is, it will just produce religious manipulation. It is useful to note that, by making such restrictions, Räsänen excludes most of the recent approaches from the "valid" scholarly work on New Testament ideas—Räsänen loves the word and uses it often in his Finnish writings. For instance the new German *Biblische theologie*, according to Räsänen, is itself merely a religious program.<sup>167</sup> Canonical criticism, in Räsänen's estimation, is problematic because of its false premises (see below), and narrative theology remains even more in the world of the

<sup>164</sup> Räsänen, *Neutestamentliche Theologie?*, 68–69.

<sup>165</sup> Räsänen, *Neutestamentliche Theologie?*, 73: "Ich mache kein Hehl daraus, dass meine Sympathie auf der Seite der 'Empiristen' liegt und dass ich eine Darstellung der frühchristlichen Religion nach ihrem modell gebaut sehen möchte."

<sup>166</sup> Räsänen, *Lux Humana*, 439–457. In the second edition of the *Beyond* (2000) the "Developments in the 1990s" are given a chapter of their own.

<sup>167</sup> Räsänen writes about this on several occasions, see Räsänen, *Challenges*, 215; cf. Räsänen, *Lux Humana*, 444–445.

texts themselves. He neglects all approaches that differ from his own and usually considers them uncritical and intentionally religious.<sup>168</sup>

Since Räisänen is so strict in excluding the canon from proper investigation into religious ideas, he must also reject other approaches that still work within the canon. There can be no pure biblical theology because the canon itself is a result of late interpretation, reducing dramatically the alleged vital religious innovation present locally in religious groups that themselves live the events the writings later refer to. It seems evident that, for Räisänen, the sociology of religion is interested in religious experience and the abundance of phenomena it creates. This, naturally, leads to the question whether this is a relevant issue in New Testament scholarship. What is Räisänen investigating and interpreting?

These important questions long for answers. If Räisänen aims at a critique of New Testament texts, as he does, why does he remove all the texts from the picture? He apparently contradicts (original) religious phenomena with (later) canonical writings of the New Testament, as he should if he wishes to engage in a good Weberian reading of religion.<sup>169</sup> One essential question remains to be answered, though. Räisänen is compelled to reconstruct the "original" phenomena by using the very canon he does not want to use. This is a methodological problem. It confirms the basic difficulty in his hermeneutics: Räisänen's reconstruction of the "early Christian religion" is entirely dependent on the historical-critical analysis concerning the emergence of the New Testament writings. Therefore, it is based strictly on a canonical investigation, making it harder to see any essential difference between Räisänen's theory and, for instance, Bultmannian form criticism.

At this point we must say something about the history-of-religion approach itself. Considering Räisänen's earlier comments on Wrede, we can see that his own history-of-religion method does not precisely follow Wrede's ideals but bears the marks of Weber's sociology of religion instead. His "true theology" attempts to unite the study of religion with a

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<sup>168</sup> In the second edition of the *Beyond* Räisänen briefly treats Childs and the canonical approach, but he groups it with Stuhlmacher's biblical theology. Probably due to the common interest in using the canon he calls the latter's approach "pan-biblical" theology and the former "theological harmonizing." Since the word harmonizing is used here, these approaches represent, for Räisänen, conservative if not fundamentalist readings. Räisänen, *Beyond* 2nd ed., 120–122.

<sup>169</sup> This is said here only for the sake of argument; in practice Räisänen works, as he himself often states, as an exegete. His theoretical problem is precisely in that he does not follow the history-of-religion (science-of-religion) method very closely.

historical-critical approach. Räisänen needs Wrede's term history of religion but he wants to apply it to religious thought. Hence one must anticipate considerable problems in Räisänen's treatment of early Christian or New Testament material. Räisänen, in his theory, states that (1) the concept of doctrine is problematic and (2) that the boundaries of the canon have nothing whatsoever to do with the original, diverse "Christian" religion. Given these premises one should assume that this primordial religion cannot be investigated by assessing any fixed theological constructions, and particularly not in any context the late canon ascribes to it. In his *Rise*, Räisänen fails to follow either one of these principles.

### 6.7. *Contribution to Contemporary Discussion VI*

Before moving to the detailed analysis of Räisänen's "history-of-religion" method we must ask, how should the writing of a New Testament theology be defined in principle? The surveys in the preceding chapters have shown that all recent monographs on the subject belong to some particular school or tradition in the field. Can they be compared, and is it possible to prioritize them? The time span is vast, and it is not easy to assess the field in its entirety—but this is a task no scholar in biblical theology can avoid today.

It would be a small miracle if Gabler's 1787 article still had the impact on biblical theology that Räisänen and several others seem to believe it does. According to the analysis and corroborated by several scholars, rationalist epistemology was abandoned already in the nineteenth century. Gabler provided the terminology but his ideas have not always been understood. There is one hermeneutical issue, however, where Gabler no doubt is timeless. He attempted to find a solution for the basic contradiction between Protestant orthodoxy and radicalized rationalism. Even later scholars, from Bultmann to Stendahl, have attempted to do this. Through his idealist thought, Gabler proposed a theory of universal truth, distilled by pure reason alone. The historical-critical movement and especially scholars in the Wrede-Räisänen current abandoned this entirely and it simultaneously vanished elsewhere as idealism gradually gave way to new trends.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> For the fate of Gabler's Kantian ideology, see also Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 14.

In practice we appear to have a limited number of alternatives. First of all the survey has shown that German liberalism is alive and well in the industry of New Testament theology. Scholars from Strecker and Hübner to Schnelle and even Wilckens try to shake the Bultmannian mantle off their shoulders but, without exception, they end up with the frustrating conclusion their great predecessor formulated: all the Church has at its disposal is the "Christ of faith." Therefore, even large monographs—and these multi-volume works are large—produce, somewhat paradoxically, a rather narrow summary of kerygmatic theology. If we apply Räisänen's dichotomy, they still represent the idealist line of "pure" biblical theology, theology of abstract ideas. This is one of the few cases where Räisänen's definition is still applicable. In practice, however, these theologies are reduced into neo-Kantian programs of ethical and anthropological systems in which even the "Christ of faith" has little to give apart from being an ethical role model.

But Räisänen and Theissen's Wredean sociology departs from kerygmatic theology. The particularism of the history-of-religion method focuses merely on "political" and pragmatist statements the texts express, and the task of the scholar is to describe these incidental and contextual religious slogans. This school deliberately aims at destroying the possibility of biblical theology. The proper task is to provide a psycho-social description of the power struggle that has produced the extant writings.

Considering the history of investigation, such a development has been somewhat surprising. Even though the—slightly misunderstood—"pure" biblical theology focused on texts and searched for abstract truths, it was gradually separated from historical reality. Then kerygmatic theology stepped in and tried to save the New Testament message from a historical-critical reduction. The Wredean history-of-religion approach uses similar principles but proceeds in the opposite direction. It first makes a distinction between separate traditions and textual phases behind individual New Testament texts and no doubt uses a historical-critical reconstruction to do so. Both of these methods then rely on rationalist *Entmythologisierung*. The Wredean approach, however, does not use the documentation of distinct beliefs in order to construct or even investigate doctrines. So, in the latter alternative, theological "truths" become mere subjective convictions.

Post-liberal biblical theology, then, has been growing incrementally from different points of departure. On the one hand, the new Tübingen school that puts the New Testament in the context of Second Temple Judaism has provided necessary new elements for theological interpretation.

On the other hand, the Anglo-American evangelical tradition has contributed especially by bringing linguistic methods to the investigation of New Testament theology. Stuhlmacher with his *Biblische* theology deals with questions of continuity and discontinuity from Testament to Testament. Scholars from Caird to Witherington, then, look for consistency by focusing on the theological identity of the early *ecclesia*. Scholars feel themselves part of a process that has been going on for two thousand years. New Testament theology, therefore, is theology of the Church, which is why soteriology is essential for any understanding of the subject.

Narratological analysis, especially of the ilk that Wright and Witherington have brought to the study, focuses on stories that direct theology and its meanings. Metanarratives are not seen separately from history but narrativity is the manifestation of meaning. This is why the content of New Testament theology is necessarily dependent on the narratological structure and form that can be detected in the texts. Following Hans Frei one can state that, thanks to new interest in textuality and narratives, the eclipse of New Testament narratological theology has ended. Biblical theology is able to combine the narrative structure of the texts with their profoundly historical nature.

One essential problem remains, however. What does the linguistic shift in the sphere of biblical theology entail? New Testament scholarship is divided on this matter. Collins, as we have noted above when treating the versions of narrative theology, has proposed that interest in the linguistic approach in fact represents a “paradigm shift from history to ‘story’ in biblical theology.”<sup>171</sup> For Collins, history and story are opposites. Narratology, in his opinion, marks the historicist’s move from historical frustration to biblical theology without destroying the theological content of the texts. By referring to Gunkel and Caird he explains how “poetry” aims to please, to elevate, to inspire and to move. There is a contrast between “referential, informative language and expressive, evocative language.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Collins, *Hebrew Bible*, 10. In principle, his solution differs little from Bultmannian kerygmatic theology. The Bible’s referential language, according to Collins, must be subjected to some kind of demythologizing, at least in terms of Troeltsch’s materialism.

<sup>172</sup> Collins, *Hebrew Bible*, 10; he states that “Gunkel’s work marked an important shift away from the attempt to interpret the text as a record of objective reality, toward an appreciation of it as a medium of human expression.” For Caird’s ideas, see Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 30–36. Hasel remarks that, along with Strecker and Räisänen, Collins belongs to those scholars who “base their conceptions of biblical theology on a strict use of the historical-critical method.” This is also why Collins refers to Troeltsch and his principles. Hasel notes that Collins’ model of “critical biblical theology” is grounded “in historical

Collins' ideas are related to Barr's here. The latter's *IDB Supplement* article on biblical theology shows that his antagonism toward the Biblical Theology Movement made him focus precisely on issues that had been raised in the discussions raised by that school of thought. As we saw above, scholars of the Biblical Theology Movement believed that the Bible was animated "by the distinctively Hebrew way of thinking," as Barr says, and focused on biblical language as well as word studies. The movement also put emphasis on the unity of the Bible and opposed all liberal views, theological or philosophical, that had been used in biblical interpretation. As Barr himself has written both on the semantics of biblical language and fundamentalism—books for which he became quite famous—one is entitled to say that opposing the Biblical Theology Movement has been a major component of his entire career. Barr is convinced that the linguistic shift questions all traditional ways of writing biblical theology.<sup>173</sup>

With the aid of Gunkel, Stendahl, and Barr, as well as certain literary critics, Collins then forms a new linguistic school of biblical interpretation. He even appeals to Frei and Yalean narratology when claiming that, in the context of the historical investigation of the Bible, a move from history to story is the only way to deal with the content of the texts. Interpretation is no longer a matter of truth.

The significance of the paradigm shift from history to story is that it abandons the last claim of biblical theology to certain knowledge of objective reality. A story is a work of the human imagination, drawing on the ingredients of human experience.<sup>174</sup>

In a theoretical sense Collins has little to contribute to Barr and Räisänen (the latter is not mentioned in Collins' bibliography). Even though Collins still wants to find a way to treat biblical theology linguistically—while Räisänen denies such a possibility—their basic point of departure is similar. The biblical presentation of religious ideas is but a result of

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criticism's presuppositions of the principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation." Hasel, *Andrews University Studies* 33 (1995) 56–58.

<sup>173</sup> Barr, *IDBSupp* (1976) 107. In the article Barr states that he "maintained that biblical theology had encouraged the misuse of linguistic evidence." He wished to correct the faults of the Biblical Theology Movement and prove that proper biblical theology did not necessarily depend on such misuse.

<sup>174</sup> Collins, *Hebrew Bible*, 11. Collins in fact provides a slightly revised version of what Barr wrote in his *Scope and Authority* ten years earlier, see Barr, *Scope and Authority*, 1–17. The subchapter is called "Story and History in Biblical Theology."



human imagination. The best one can do with it is to treat it as a story or a legend, or a Christian symbolic world, as Räisänen puts it.<sup>175</sup>

It is easy to understand that a linguistic approach or a narratological reading as such first creates these kinds of dichotomies and oppositions. As Scobie remarks, a literary approach often focuses “on the final form of the text” rather than applying its ideas to form criticism or other methods. It is also more interested in synchronic reading than diachronic reading. “They seek to look not through the text to the history which lies behind it but at the text as it stands.”<sup>176</sup> If one were to assume that historical investigation and epistemology have not undergone any changes during this academic shift, the treatment of texts would inevitably move entirely to the sphere of the imagination.

Hasel has shown that Collins in his hermeneutics attempts to define narrative theology and provide a functional interpretation. Stories, for him, reflect the “real” historical situation only indirectly and must be interpreted by these standards: “Their value for theology lies in their functions as myth or story rather than in their historical accuracy.”<sup>177</sup>

The same point can be made with reference to other biblical genres besides narrative—the poetic genres of prophecy and psalms or the inductive, pragmatic formulations of wisdom. Biblical theology is not only narrative theology, but more broadly it is an experiential, symbolic theology, which can find expression in several genres.<sup>178</sup>

Such reasoning lacks one essential argument, though. The linguistic model in itself, from the days of Ferdinand de Saussure and the early structuralists, is a matter of meaning, epistemology, language, reference, and truth. The linguistic shift is a sign of discontinuity: it marks the decline of historicism. It signals the epistemological bankruptcy that positivism engendered, as well as the revival of new signification theories. Collins has been insensitive to this change in the philosophy of science. With Barr and Stendahl, he still attempts to transfer all treatment of biblical texts under the strict direction of the historical-critical method.

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<sup>175</sup> It probably should be noted that Collins usually refers to Old Testament examples and Old Testament scholars, even though he does mention some New Testament scholars and calls his approach “biblical” theology, referring thus to the entire Bible. In this respect his approach differs slightly from that of Räisänen.

<sup>176</sup> Scobie, *TyndB* 42 (1991) 44–45. “They also tend to underline how a literary work, once it has achieved its final written form, attains a life of its own, independent of the historical circumstances which gave it birth.”

<sup>177</sup> Collins, *Hebrew Bible*, 11. Hasel, *Andrews University Studies* 33 (1995) 58.

<sup>178</sup> Collins, *Hebrew Bible*, 12.



As we have argued throughout this study, the most significant methodological developments in biblical criticism concern the reassessment of the historical-critical method and the birth of a new era of fresh approaches. Such a change has revolutionized Gospel studies, the study of the historical Jesus, the examination of Christology, Pauline studies, as well as the whole area of New Testament theology, as the present chapter shows. The traditional historical-critical method no longer has the exclusive position it used to have among biblical scholars.<sup>179</sup>

Once again we arrive at the basic question: how do we really understand the writing of history? In chapter 2 we discussed the change that occurred in the methodology of historical investigation after Hayden White as well as several other theorists. Scholars started to pay attention to the fact that narrative structure not only constitutes the description but “inheres in the events themselves.” Collins, in his discussion about the linguistic shift, notes that not all scholars in this new current accept his claim concerning the fictionalist nature of history writing.

An example of a mediating position is that of Meir Sternberg who has given words to a post-historicist, structuralist understanding of writing history. Sternberg reminds us that, according to the new views, writing history always suggests an interpretation of the meaning of certain historical events.<sup>180</sup> History as a story, in this sense, cannot be reduced to legendary fictionalizing. Historical descriptions never were empirical documents of “what really happened.” Nowhere in ancient literature can we find simple lists of brute facts. In history-writing, the issue is not primarily about the truth itself but in the distinction between the truth value and truth claim. Sternberg starts with a false dichotomy between these two.

The shift of meaning leads to a symbiosis of meaning, whereby history-writing is wedded to and fiction-writing opposed to factual truth. Now this double identification forms a category-mistake of the first order. For history-writing is not a record of fact. Nor is fiction-writing a tissue of free inventions but a discourse that claims freedom of invention. The antithesis

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<sup>179</sup> For instance Stegemann, in an article on Räisänen, wishes to point out that “the historical method does not free the historian from his or her subjective and cultural bias.” Stegemann, *Moving Beyond*, 226.

<sup>180</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, 23f. Carson, referring to Sternberg’s remarks, states that were the biblical narratives read as fiction God would turn into a creature of the imagination. Carson, *BBR* 5 (1995) 26. This must be true for Collins’ hermeneutics but not necessarily for Frei and Lindbeck to whom Carson refers.

lies not in the presence or absence of truth value but of the commitment to truth value.<sup>181</sup>

Collins does admit that Sternberg's view challenges his own—and that of Robert Alter—but, nevertheless, he assumes that Sternberg's understanding of the narrative nature of history-writing supports his own view in principle. This is a mistake because Sternberg emphasizes that history-writing belongs to a genre other than fiction: fiction always maintains the freedom of fictionalizing. "Even where a writer of fiction adheres to the facts, his adherence and the world thereby rendered make different sense from the historian's, because he could always do otherwise."<sup>182</sup>

As we saw during the analysis, even Ranke himself did not assume such an approach to history. The famous "Rankean" view has always been nothing but a historicist program promoted by Troeltsch among others—and whom Collins and Barr still use in their own writings. In contrast, the new perspective assumes that theology is implied in the writing itself (history as a story).<sup>183</sup>

This, in turn, brings to the fore the previously discussed issue about the nature of truth. As noted, truth—and especially historical truth—is not a matter of hammers and nails. Historical truth, not to mention theological truth, is about positions, relations, attitudes and causalities. Truth is a matter of values, beliefs and doctrines. The significance of the world view itself is relative in its relation to the treatment of truth. Collins, following Troeltsch and Gunkel, has fallen into the positivist trap and ends up simply making generalizing claims based on extreme empiricism. In opposition to this, we need to admit today that scientific or academic epistemology cannot be just a matter of rejecting metaphysics.

What is even more important is that the linguistic shift cannot be interpreted merely in terms of positivism. Instead, it is a post/modern

<sup>181</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, 25.

<sup>182</sup> Sternberg, *Poetics*, 25–26. Ollenburger remarks that there is a categorical difference between "(a) the relation of a text's genre to *its* truth claim, and (b) the truth claims *we* can make for a text." Collins commits himself to (b). Therefore Collins and Sternberg "seem to argue in opposite directions." Ollenburger claims that: "Sternberg would charge Collins with misidentifying 'history writing with historical truth and, correspondingly, of reading postulates with the reader's beliefs.'" Ollenburger, *Problems and Perspectives*, 306–307 fn. 60; referring to Sternberg, *Poetics*, 33.

<sup>183</sup> Already in 1975 Stuhlmacher wrote: "In a hermeneutic of consent we need first to recall that as early as the nineteenth century the attempt at an objective, naturalistic view of history was defeated." Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism*, 84. He also referred to Hahn who claims that scholars should today be able to recognize the markedly defective view of history which has stamped historical criticism.

phenomenon in a constructive, structuralist sense. As noted above, it concerns questioning, reversal and discontinuity in methodological approaches. The paradigm shift that Collins anticipates is not something that takes place in the sphere of the *modern*, as he seems to believe. In contrast, the linguistic turn marks the important shift away from the modern, away from Troeltsch, Wrede, Gunkel and the other historicists that Collins mentions in his article.

Meaning, in the context of narratology, is especially a matter of semiotics. In the process of signification people ascribe meaning to certain linguistic signs. In a particular historical situation, thus, they have a proper justification for the meaning they invest in the signs in the signification process. This justification seldom concerns merely a mechanical reference to empirical "facts," even though referentiality is naturally involved in these events. The justification itself, however, can be presented in narrative form dealing with processes and developments.<sup>184</sup> This is especially the case regarding Jesus' missions, his acts in Jerusalem, and different descriptions about the meaning of his death. The truth value of biblical statements and signification processes is hardly ever the matter of positivist facticity. And the understanding of historical documents, in turn, is a matter of interpreting these signs and narratives.<sup>185</sup>

Stendahl separated "what it meant" from "what it means," and revealed that he was still dependent on a Bultmannian conception of language and meaning. As we have stated in the present investigation, the linguistic shift transformed the view of language and meaning completely.

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<sup>184</sup> Collins refers to Alter, reading him through Barr, and claims that biblical "sacred history" *should* be read as "prose fiction." Collins, *Hebrew Bible*, 10. This is a mistake because, even though the literary critic Alter does say that certain Old Testament stories can in a literary sense be read as "historicized fiction," literary critics do not aim to displace theology. "Let me hasten to say that in giving such weight to fictionality, I do not mean to discount the historical impulse that informs the Hebrew Bible. The God of Israel, as so often has been observed, is above all the God of history: the working out of His purposes in history is a process that compels the attention of the Hebrew imagination, which is thus led to the most vital interest in the concrete and differential character of historical events." Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 27, 36.

<sup>185</sup> To be as clear as possible here, it is not the task of a historian to deny charismatic phenomena and attempt to give them a reductionist explanation. New Testament texts clearly record experiences of such phenomena, and this must be considered the testimony of the writings themselves. Beyond this, it is a matter of personal opinion whether a scholar believes in the reality of the events or not—but he is not allowed to suspect the reality of the experiences as such. The inability to make this distinction and recognize the phenomenal reality of the New Testament writers is one of the most severe flaws of the historical-critical paradigm.

The linguistic turn that has taken place in the Western philosophy of science since Saussure also alters the assessment of the premises that direct biblical theology. In the days of the “modern,” the idea of primitive reference along with inductivism and simple empirical epistemology dictated the hermeneutical presuppositions behind biblical theology. “What it meant” could well be reinterpreted via demythologizing and replacing biblical ideas by eternal truths or existential wisdom. After the linguistic shift, however, interest in language and the texts themselves revived. Meaning, as noted, is coded in the expressions, and it does not lie hidden somewhere behind the texts.

It is useful to remember the simple and insightful remark that Fee and Stuart have made concerning textual readings: “A text cannot mean what it never meant.”<sup>186</sup> This is reminiscent of a young Ricoeur’s criticism towards Bultmann’s interpretation. Ricoeur reminded his readers that—after the linguistic shift—the meaning of a *text* can never be located outside language itself. Textual meaning is a matter of semantics. It is probably not an easy matter to clarify, at least in complex texts, but it is dependent on words and signification.<sup>187</sup>

When the new approach is applied to assess Stendahl’s dichotomy, which has become surprisingly popular among scholars, the “hermeneutical” task appears in a new light. One can, of course, make a distinction between “what it meant” and “what it means” but biblical theology in that case is a matter of the former (and in a sense that Stendahl did not mean). Biblical theology is a discipline that attempts to sort out the theological content of the extant text. It would be too simplistic to call this just a descriptive task, though. It is a difficult hermeneutical matter that demands skills in semantics and semiotics. Personal signification, about which Stendahl speaks and on which he puts much weight, is completely another matter and belongs to another category. It is a matter of taste, as even Nietzsche said.

Furthermore, it is essential to remember that the arguments that emphasize the importance of reconstructing historical sources behind extant writings—as far as the New Testament is concerned—deal solely with the gospel narratives. They are irrelevant in Pauline studies. They are arguments created in the sphere of form criticism and, as we have seen

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<sup>186</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read*, 27.

<sup>187</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation theory*, 20–21. To say this does not mean that the process of signification itself should or could be simplified. Examples at the end of chapters 4 and 7 shed light on the world of semantics.

during the analysis, have later mostly been abandoned by New Testament scholars. Questions about the historical Jesus, or *truth* about the Jesus of history, cannot be solved by the postulations of form criticism and tradition history. Instead, the hypotheses concerning true historical sources must be evaluated in terms of values and beliefs. This is the main shift that has taken place in gospel studies over the last two decades.

Collins, Stendahl and Barr have attempted to separate narratology from history and truth but this must be seen as a remnant of historicism and a byway in the inevitable development of Western philosophy of science. Instead, narratology is part of a valid *historical* treatment of New Testament texts. New methods can help scholars to reconstruct the life and teaching of Jesus and his followers increasingly better, and to present a justified and consistent picture of New Testament theology. Truth about the New Testament cannot be equated with the Wredean understanding of true religion—which would be the line Räisänen has sought in a materialist sense—but it surely is a way to religious truth.

The linguistic reorientation, thus, is a significant shift in biblical scholarship. It means a turn away from the historicist position where scholars believed that they could understand the Bible and biblical theology in terms of “the modern.” This trust in the modern in a strict sense resulted in a belief that Räisänen shares: namely that modern scholars are able to understand the very nature of religion and also explain the genesis of Christian doctrines through their reductionist theory.

But now we must return to the original question. What is New Testament theology all about? How should the writing of a New Testament theology be defined and, even more importantly, what is the primary *aim* of New Testament theology? If Räisänen’s work has had any positive effects on the scholarly community, bringing this issue to the fore is one of them. He has opened the discussion about the nature of biblical theology, and there is room for several different voices. What should scholars aspire to when writing? And what is the proper method to achieve that purpose?

Assessing the above-mentioned traditions from this point of view, it is obvious that scholars in the traditional school believed that the task is dogmatic. This aspect is necessary but insufficient as far the entire task is considered. The project is in danger of falling into the trap of conventional *loci*, the theological categories that have governed the field for centuries. The solution to the problems that emerge cannot be found in the idealist tradition, however. At the risk repeating ourselves, we must say that, in its Hegelian phase, the idealistic “pure” biblical theology was sundered from history. It aimed at timeless truths that can be justified with

biblical texts. Theology, from this perspective, is a collection of universal propositions that may inspire people but that have little to do with their every-day life. Idealist interpretation culminated in praising spiritual ideals and the power of the individual spirit. In a sense, the Christian faith was exploited in cultural evolution where idealistic innovations were believed to help humanity evolve.

Even these Hegelian heirs to pure biblical theology depart from proper theology and provide a theory of religion. Their view on New Testament theology depends on how they understand the very nature of religion. In this sense Räsänen has been on the right track with his classification: as far as the history of investigation is considered, several programs have relied on a special understanding of religion itself. If they see religion as such being a system of ideas that direct history and principles that guide human lives, there is little room for any traditional, textually based theology. Rationalism, above all, created a hermeneutical tradition where the New Testament message was assumed to be something different than what the texts themselves express.<sup>188</sup>

When existentialism entered the scene, the aspirations changed again. The target of New Testament theology this time was the verbalization of religious experience and the kerygma behind the propositions themselves. Here Kant beat Hegel. Theology in a traditional sense—the mythological theology that had not yet encountered existential philosophy—turned into a human enterprise. Anthropology replaced Christology. The mission of the biblical kerygma was believed to be in articulating what constitutes an authentic life. The program of *Entmythologisierung* guaranteed that God-talk had no reference to reality. God-talk had to be reduced to human language whose immanent references were in people's lives. Existentialism, already in its philosophical form, was not practical enough to produce any proper results in the lives of its followers. This is why it turned into a psychological program that attempted to encourage personal development towards an authentic lifestyle. This is as far as theological existentialism has gone as well. Its weakest point is that it says almost nothing apart from articulating a general principle of balanced adult daily life. This level of discussion could be achieved without ancient writings or difficult philosophy.

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<sup>188</sup> Berger, for instance, incorporates a Hegelian idealist theology that is based on a conviction that great personalities push the dialectics of history forward. Jesus was often seen as one such hero. See Berger, *Exegese und Philosophie*, 93–101.

Existentialism does provide a complete theory of religion. Since inner personal experience and verbal expression have been separated from each other, the real area of religion now concerns *Erlebnis*, personal experience and emotional response. There are no doctrinal statements in this religion since, the theory claims, human beings turn all expressions of kerygma into myths—ancient myths or modern myths. Therefore, the proper content of “New Testament theology,” according to this view, is the opposite of the information found in the texts themselves.

There is a Kantian tone in this, as one might expect of a phenomenological system: true religion is seen as an a priori truth common to all people merely on the grounds of “pure reason,” namely autonomic reason alone. Universal religion corresponds to universal ethics and the categorical imperative. Existentialist religion is necessarily universal because it cannot have local, verbalized forms. Bultmann no longer accepted the ethical interpretation, as we have seen. Nevertheless, Bultmann and some of his followers apparently still believed that one needs to be addressed by the one true God of the biblical tradition. It seems like the obstacles against a specific interpretation have collapsed, allowing anything-goes approach for religious experience. Any experience may be considered as good and divine since, in the end, there are no rules for the kerygma. There are not even theoretical or imaginable propositional definitions for the kerygma because that would be the end of religion.

It seems even more probable now that Räisänen’s theory has consistently forwarded Bultmann’s project beyond his own imaginings. For Bultmann, there is no direct way from the divine kerygma to propositional language. Kerygma cannot be conceptualized. This faced Bultmann (with his mystery-theology) and his followers with a paradox: how could there be, outside language, authentic religion at all? Räisänen has solved the Bultmannian paradox and taken the inferences further. If every theological statement in history is captured in a particular time and particular culture, the history of theology—as well as the history of New Testament theology—must be but a chain of interpretation.

For Räisänen, any human experience is equal to any other. It is true that he leaves the phenomenological question about the reality of the kerygma aside and focuses on mere expressions—but one should perhaps remember that even Räisänen speaks of God in all his writings, at least until his last publications. Because the treatment of the Bible’s texts, for him, means treating false verbalizations, the only interesting task left is to find a proper way to explain those strange propositions. This leaves room for his application of the symbolic universe program.



This leads us to ask why does Räsänen actually deny that theological propositions have any inspirational, true content. It is true that even in his early article on authority he used rationalist principles in order to justify the rejection of traditional views on biblical inspiration. It would be too easy, however, to make Räsänen nothing more than a deist like Reimarus. His theory in all its different versions is too complicated for that. He does say that both eschatology (Jesus never came back) and Christology (all the contesting Christologies) have collapsed. There is no valid content in New Testament soteriology. But this cannot explain everything. There are several German scholars who have weaved their way through these obstacles and still found some doctrinal content in the Christian faith. Why is Räsänen so categorical in his rejection of religious language?

I suppose this leaves us with two alternatives. Either Räsänen is a complete materialist who leaves God's name in the culture for sentimental reasons (as he confesses in one of his Finnish articles), or he has learned from Bultmann.<sup>189</sup> If indeed Bultmann's thinking has affected him, there is a little more room for discussing his theory. In the situation where Räsänen has found himself, it must be tempting to adopt the view that no religious statement ever can be inspirational because human beings have no words for divine experience. And Räsänen does use the word experience. In fact, Bultmann's key word also became his most important term as he developed the idea of the chain of interpretation.<sup>190</sup>

Furthermore, there is a theoretical problem concerning the relation of the history-of-religion approach and biblical theology. This is a neutral matter in itself and concerns the basic difference between the disciplines. The science of religion investigates all possible religions. In this discipline it has been very difficult to provide any widely accepted definition of religion. Religion no doubt has to do with a divine figure, a god or goddess, but this can hardly be held as a sufficient uniting factor between different religions. Some religions may have savior-figures or other central inaugurators of the sacred tradition. Others, in turn, deal with the noumena and attempt to manipulate nature, weather and fertility. There are wisdom-

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<sup>189</sup> This was discussed in 4.7. above. The reference is to his Finnish writings, Räsänen, *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 132–133.

<sup>190</sup> Someone might see a contradiction between Räsänen's semantic and literary emphasis, on the one hand, and experience, on the other. Experience has little room in the context of fictional doctrines. It is true that Bultmann provides the concept of experience, but there must be more to it. Bultmann uses experience merely in a Kantian sense. The solution lies in the fact that Räsänen believes that experience has a different role. It is not a personal feeling but, as we have seen, an experience of some social event.

religions and systems with several initiations. Moreover, certain religions can be seen as nothing more than moralist programs. This wide variety does not help the investigation of the New Testament, and it is why history-of-religion scholars, including Räsänen, have not even attempted to apply proper science of religion criteria in their hermeneutical work. The Wredean history of early Christian religion has been governed by very traditional Christian theology and its conventional patterns, not to speak of dogmas, as the outline of Räsänen's *Rise* shows.<sup>191</sup>

Even though Räsänen and his colleagues have not performed traditional science-of-religion analyses of New Testament material, they have attempted to find a third alternative. They have wanted to decipher the religious variety behind the texts, and this has been done mainly through form criticism and redaction criticism. Differing religious views are not views found in the documents themselves but, instead, in the reconstructions that make claims about certain theological realities outside the canonical texts. Such a procedure can be defined as a materialist reduction of different religious conceptions that particular groups have adopted. Religion is treated as a sociological phenomenon. This is also the reason why scholars can hold religion to be a projection of the mind, an objectified symbolic world of social consciousness, or just a product of brain malfunction. There is little difference between these explanations. Hence the history-of-religion study can be said to have a merely particularistic sociological task, perhaps with some questions concerning the history of ideas sprinkled around. All that scholars can ever expect to find is a collection of conflicting and competing religious views, symbols that represent institutionalized experience.

And the difficulties grow. Symbols as such, in the sociological interpretation, are seen as the product of communities and, therefore, they necessarily also indicate that different communities are in conflict. Scholars seem to be uncertain about whether such symbols are collective or just personal. According to the original theory, however, it is unlikely that each person could have a symbolic universe of his or her own. Therefore, in New Testament interpretation, one must presume the existence

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<sup>191</sup> Balla notes that the mere division of labor between New Testament theology and science of religion does not justify the neglect of investigating the former. Balla, *Challenges*, 22. Räsänen has inherited the tendency from Wrede but, in practice, he does not want to work with the method he has chosen. Already in the *Beyond* he writes that a "comprehensive history of early Christian religion," concerning cult, rite, myth and communality, would be "too immense a task to be at all realistic." Räsänen, *Beyond*, 105. This problem concerning method will be discussed later in chapter 10.

of particular communities behind different texts or even different views appearing in these texts. Räisänen's *Rise* treats just this kind of conflicting symbolism. In our analysis, then, it will be necessary to investigate how Räisänen defines the communities that create different symbols, namely theological views.<sup>192</sup>

It is easy to see that the role of the canon is essential in this discussion. Most scholars taking part in the debate over New Testament theology argue for one view or another concerning this issue—and not least because Räisänen has taken so negative a stance against the primacy of the canon.<sup>193</sup> The issue itself and the problem it is supposed to imply are far from clear. Be it a theological solution (like that of Thiselton who accepts Räisänen's claim about the ecclesial nature of such a choice), or the history-of-religion alternative, the basic problem is that scholars in both currents must necessarily use canonical writings—and even Räisänen uses them abundantly.<sup>194</sup>

The theoretical problem could also be called anachronism. In practice, Räisänen has been forced to work with the extant New Testament canon, even though he claims to work on “behind the text” issues. Problems discussed in chapter 2 return rear their heads here. Apart from the canonical writings, there is practically no information available about early Christian congregations. This is why Räisänen makes all his inferences on the basis of New Testament texts—despite the fact that he himself believes that form critical reconstruction can be used as evidence for a new history of early Christian religious phenomena. These are not pieces of evidence but results from reductionist reconstruction.<sup>195</sup> We are no longer in the position where the inferences of “pure reason” as such can

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<sup>192</sup> Cf. also discussion in chapters 3.3. and 7.2.

<sup>193</sup> The role of the canon, after Räisänen's influence, is discussed by almost all participants in the debate over New Testament theology, see especially Balla, *Challenges*, 86ff., Thielman, *Theology*, 28ff., Scobie, *Ways*, 38ff.

<sup>194</sup> Scholars have in fact criticized Räisänen for not focusing on religious phenomena but on canonical texts. See discussion later in 9.5.

<sup>195</sup> *Evidence* must be presented on the basis of extant documents. Historical evidence, as many scholars have reminded us, must be a source that still exists in our time. This means that evidence in biblical scholarship must be found in the sources themselves, not behind them in imaginative reconstructions. The latter are something else: the results of an investigation, explanatory theories, and constructions made even against extant evidence.

be considered as valid scientific evidence either in historical investigation or theological construction.<sup>196</sup>

As several scholars have now noted, the New Testament canon is the construction of a community of believers, just as separate New Testament writings are works written by people who have experienced a significant Christian conversion and who confess a faith that is not merely denigrated by Jews and Greeks (Romans) but also felt as a threat either to their religion or politics/the society, or both.<sup>197</sup> The New Testament, in this respect, is expected to be a collection that reflects the beliefs of the movement that confessed Christ. Therefore, New Testament theology is *sui generis*. It is theology concerning congregations that had a purpose in their teaching and a movement that had a mission.

This being the state of affairs for the theory of New Testament theology, one is compelled to discuss the changes the methodology of biblical theology has gone through during the last two decades. There are certain issues that make some of the previous approaches unsuitable in the present situation.<sup>198</sup>

(1) *The inappropriateness of the unity and diversity problem.* According to many scholars, the investigation of New Testament theology necessarily has to tackle the diversity problem that academic discussion raised many decades ago. Scholars from Käsemann to Dunn and Räisänen have demanded that no treatment of the issue can be made without providing some kind of solution for the basic problem. Diversity here is understood in the sense that Räisänen later understood it: as a set of contradictions that are not reconcilable by any theological maneuver. This means true diversity in the context of which no consistent dogmatic treatment of the texts is possible, even in principle. There are many reasons why such a demand must today be considered inappropriate. Claims of essential diversity derive above all from Reimarian Jesus-studies and Bultmanian form criticism, adopted by Käsemann later. This hypotheses' best

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<sup>196</sup> Cf. Stegemann's comments on the nature of evidence: "What we define, using the remnants of this past, as 'history,' is the result of scholarly construction, or, preferably, the result of a scholarly discourse that generates a historical image. One of the fatal errors of historical positivism consists of taking the result of this discourse to be the *objective* representation of the past." Stegemann, *Moving Beyond*, 227.

<sup>197</sup> See for instance Thielman, *Theology*, 28–29; Balla, *Challenges*, 101, 106.

<sup>198</sup> In a sense such need for change reveals a dissatisfaction, as Adam says, "with the state of New Testament theology," and especially concerning the heritage of modernism. New views, at least partly, emerge from the "interrogation of the project of modernity," as Adam calls it. Adam, *Making Sense*, 109. I would add that it concerns especially the epistemological change and the linguistic shift that are typical of twenty-first century theology.

days have gone. Furthermore, the claims about irreconcilable Christological views—including the issue of adoptionist Christology—have been under lively discussion for a long time and can no longer be considered as a self-evident factor in the diversity discussion. As the conditions surrounding the diversity problem have changed essentially the claim itself cannot be held as a *sine qua non* condition in biblical theology. A multiplicity of expressions is not yet diversity, and abundant points of view does not imply contradiction. The above-mentioned points are related to certain other changes in recent scholarship that need to be discussed separately.<sup>199</sup>

(2) *The Third Quest in Jesus-studies*. Several scholars have noted that New Testament theology today must take the Third Quest for the historical Jesus properly into account when assessing the relation between Jesus and his apostles.<sup>200</sup> Previously scholars referred to Bultmann who believed that the historical Jesus did not belong inside the sphere of New Testament theology. Today the situation is reversed. Jesus and his message belong to the most investigated issues in the whole of scholarship. Apart from the (late) Robert Funk's Jesus seminar in the U.S., few if any scholars accept Troeltschean principles or the traditional liberal (Straussian) view on Jesus, which Bultmann still held in high regard. Now Jesus' message is investigated on its own terms and reconstructions range from eschatology to high messianology. This necessarily changes the writing of New Testament theology.<sup>201</sup> Many scholars believe this aspect is important for the discussion about diversity. Despite different expressions found in different New Testament writings, all interpretations about the core message of the new or renewed faith point in one and the same direction:

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<sup>199</sup> Many scholars today still include the diversity problem in their agenda. Carson pays special attention to it, Carson, *BBR* 5 (1995) 23–25, and Rowe writes his entire article from this perspective, Rowe, *JBL* 125 (2006) 393ff. Even Matera remarks that “NT theology is a literary and theological discipline that must respect the diversity of the writings even as it seeks their unity.” Matera, *CBQ* 67 (2005) 21. I would suggest here a complete reevaluation of the premises of this twentieth century discussion.

<sup>200</sup> See for instance Matera, *CBQ* 67 (2005) 19; Rowe, *JBL* 125 (2006) 406; Witherington, *Indelible Image* 1, 54–58. Even Dunn emphasizes this in a recent article, even though he never leaves his diversity program. Dunn, *Aufgabe*, 230–231.

<sup>201</sup> Hengel expresses this pointedly in his comment on the new state of gospel criticism. “By now the historical foundations of Bultmann's picture of primitive Christianity which led to his radical verdicts [...] have collapsed. The sharp opposition between ‘Pal-estinian’ and ‘Hellenistic’ communities cannot be maintained any more than the complete splintering of the tradition, as if there had been neither eye-witnesses nor real memory, and the fundamental anonymity of the tradition and writing of the Gospels.” Hengel, *Four Gospels*, 294 fn. 570.

the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. As the investigation of the historical Jesus develops new perspectives, this aspect is given more weight in biblical hermeneutics.<sup>202</sup>

(3) *A changed view on Second Temple Judaism.* One of the most important changes in New Testament scholarship has been the extraordinary growth of Jewish studies after the Second World War. After the decline of the history-of-religions school, the New Testament and early Christian teaching have been brought into their natural context and, therefore, New Testament theology today must be historically sensitive and aim at formulating historically relevant constructions. Scholars have investigated the Jewish Jesus and Paul the Pharisee, to name a couple of important areas, and results have been convincing. There is nothing left of Bultmann's Gnostic Paul. Even though scholars have not been able to reach an agreement over the question about Paul and the Law, the two rival currents emphasizing covenantal nomism on the one hand, and traditional nomism on the other, both agree on the basic move: there is no return to the old history-of-religion explanation of Paul's theology.<sup>203</sup>

(4) *The abandonment of evolutionary Christology.* Discussion over New Testament theology used to be directed by a pattern where the alleged development of early Christology was presented as evolution that started with adoptionist Christology and ended a couple of generations later with "the myth of God incarnate." After Hurtado, Chester, and several other authors it is no longer possible to justify such a pattern based on the different descriptions of Christology. Christological expressions have different purposes and different functions in different narratives. High Christology can be detected in the earliest strata of confessional

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<sup>202</sup> Even though Frey holds that it is important to treat the problem of diversity seriously, he emphasizes that there exists a justification for unity, too, precisely on the above-mentioned basis. "Der bei allen Differenzen in den Interpretation allen neutestamentlichen Zeugen gemeinsame Rückbezug auf das Wirken, Leiden, Sterben und die Auferstehung Jesu von Nazareth ist vielleicht der bedeutendste Grund dafür, daß es angebracht ist, nach der Einheit der neutestamentlichen Theologie zu fragen." Frey, *Aufgabe*, 50.

<sup>203</sup> Referring to the various currents in Second Temple Judaism, such as wisdom literature and apocalyptic movements, Frey writes that the methodology of New Testament theology needs to take these into account since they are deeply relevant for the understanding New Testament texts and their theology. "Dieser Kontext muß historisch in angemessener Weise zur Geltung gebracht werden (ohne daß dabei weitere Horizonte der griechisch-römischen Welt ausgeschlossen werden könnten), und er ist zugleich theologisch für das Verständnis der neutestamentlichen Texte von tiefgreifender Relevanz." Frey, *Aufgabe*, 49.

homologies. Evolutionary hermeneutics does not suit the writing of New Testament theology.<sup>204</sup>

(5) *Changes in method.* As noted several times during this study, scholars have been alert to the decline of the historical-critical methodology at the dawn of the linguistic shift. The focus of interest has shifted from a compilation of tradition to textuality itself. Therefore, content matters are best investigated through narratology, especially when aided by semiotics. Post-liberal New Testament theology wishes to leave the “eclipse of narrative” behind and, therefore, focuses on metanarratives that direct the formation of particular beliefs.<sup>205</sup>

(6) *Consciousness of philosophical commitments.* Since the impact of philosophy on biblical hermeneutics has been among the interests of the present investigation it is appropriate to comment on it. Standard theories on New Testament theology have been profoundly indebted to different philosophical stances, starting with Deism and Wolffian rationalism and continuing to Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger. These commitments teach scholars the old lesson: if all you have is a hammer, the world starts to look like nails. If the discussion in New Testament theology wants to continue the dialogue, scholars must be ready to submit their philosophical premises to open discussion. Any categorical denial of the traditional New Testament theology discipline itself—as attempted by the Wredean school—shows a lack of disinterested respect if not disrespect towards other approaches with different premises.

These changes prove that, in New Testament theology scholarship, there is no longer a compulsory demand, deriving from Käsemann’s time, to address diversity when treating theological issues. The unity and diversity question can be discussed but it is not a methodological necessity that every scholar should address every time they work on these issues. There is multiplicity in theological expression in the New Testament, of course, but it is not a Dunnian diversity that must always be assumed to be (once again methodologically) contradictory, just as there is no

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<sup>204</sup> It is useful to read the general introduction to the central methodological issues by Hurtado, *Lord*, 98ff.

<sup>205</sup> There are several examples of such a shift to narratology. Witherington, for instance, wrote a complete work on Paul from this perspective, *Paul’s Narrative Thought World*. Matera, in his article, suggests a narrative approach, *CBQ* 67 (2005) 18, and later realizes his project in his *Theology*. Even Rowe states that, in the scholarly community, “there is a notable absence of reflection on narrative as a possible way to consider the problem” of unity and diversity. Rowe holds that it has potential to solve one of the most intriguing problems of New Testament theology. Rowe, *JBL* 125 (2006) 408–409.



demythologization that should necessarily be performed (contra Stendahl), or a Gnostic Paul whose Christology should be first deconstructed before the true theological stratum can be treated (contra Schmithals).

Where, then, should New Testament theology aim? What can be considered as the positive and constructive elements of New Testament theology in contemporary discussion? Certain simple definitions can be suggested, and most of them have already appeared in the scholarly discussions about New Testament theology.

First, New Testament theology is about the *content* of the texts. This is almost like a truism but it has not been so in the course of history. Theology is not dependent on a historical-critical investigation about the compilation of different texts or on “behind the text” issues—and it should not be defined in relation to such issues. Theology necessarily deals with ideas, propositions, statements and the like that can be found in different writings. Balla is quite right in commenting that theology as such is not merely about doctrines but concerns “all affirmations and actions which are in relationship with God.”<sup>206</sup>

Second, New Testament theology is about religious identity. Scholars who investigate theology in the canonical writings should focus on passages that express the core of the writer’s faith or his community’s faith. This is why confessions, homologies and Christological hymns play a special role in New Testament theology, as many scholars have noted. Following Stuhlmacher, several scholars also use the concept of “rule of faith” (cf. *kanōn*, Gal. 6:16; *rhēma tēs pisteōs*, Rom. 10:8). Religious identity can best be detected in passages that emphasize a turn or conversion, or a contradiction between beliefs or life-styles.<sup>207</sup>

Third, New Testament theology concerns soteriology. As noted above, theology in these writings is about salvation, and certain self-evident facts should be borne in mind as the work is conducted. Recent New Testament investigation has emphasized several detailed features that support the main idea or theme (which is so general that is not yet even a

<sup>206</sup> Balla, *Challenges*, 21.

<sup>207</sup> Stuhlmacher puts this more eloquently by saying that New Testament theology needs to present “lines of theological unity in the kerygma.” The twenty-four books of the New Testament canon, united with the corpus of Old Testament texts, forms an entity where the early Church evidently found its “regula fidei.” Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie I*, 34; see also Balla, *Challenges*, 11. Balla accepts Stuhlmacher’s idea and modifies it only by emphasizing that the descriptive historical work already supports the theological task. The role of confessions is further emphasized for instance by Balla himself, *Challenges*, 200–206; and Rowe, *JBL* 125 (2006) 408.

metanarrative itself). For instance eschatological hope is evident in all genres and all New Testament writings. Several scholars speak of the restoration of Israel, which is a theme that can easily be discerned in different texts. New Testament authors preach against sin and *apistia*. God demands a true and faithful heart. Since this has not been realized on earth, God sends his salvation, his saving righteousness to people by his own good will. Good news, *euangelion*, simply concerns God's saving act. Jesus is depicted as the final sacrifice from which the forgiveness of sins can be proclaimed to the whole of humankind. The New Testament gospel is about renewal and restoration. The result of both Jesus' proclamation and the Apostle's work is a new community that is described as the new eschatological temple on earth. Such simple and familiar theological ideas are openly described in every New Testament text from Matthew to Revelation. They may be too simple to satisfy the complex mind of the modern world and its scholars but, if New Testament theology wishes to be academically sound and scientifically consistent, it cannot overlook the obvious.<sup>208</sup>

Fourth, New Testament theology is about textuality. *Text* must be understood here in the postliberal sense, meaning anything from a thought or propositional address to a sermon and other written texts. Theology, being textual, contains meanings that can rather easily be investigated by proper methods. This is where semiotics, rhetoric, and narratology have become valuable in theological work. As many writers today emphasize, theology in ancient writings is most often directed by metanarratives that can be discerned in many kinds of texts.<sup>209</sup>

And fifth, where there is textuality, there is intertextuality. Texts live in a flow, and in a particular cultural context they form a tapestry. In every text there are echoes of earlier texts and promises of new texts.

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<sup>208</sup> Matera quotes Stuhlmacher and Hahn when stating that the Christian interpretation the New Testament provides about the Old Testament focuses on God who brings about salvation. As Hahn said, God's revelation of salvation begins with Jesus' ministry. Matera, *CBQ* 67 (2005) 12–13. Furthermore, in a critical essay on Räisänen's ideas Hahn states that New Testament theology can never remain neutral. Instead, it must explicate the "Glaubensgründe," grounds for faith and beliefs. Hahn, *Studien I*, 156.

<sup>209</sup> See for instance Jeanrond, *JR* 76 (1996) 240–241; and Mead, *Biblical Theology*, 135–138. I have argued this in my Finnish writings, Eskola, *Tekstin vallankumous*, 64–72. Cf. Turner and Green, referring to Goldingay: "Narrative has a capacity for embodying complexity within God-human relations, for holding in tension competing ideas about God or humanity or the cosmos, and for transformation within characters (including god himself) that defies the sorts of categories typically associated with systematic theology." Turner and Green, *Between Two Horizons*, 17.

The textual reality of the New Testament is necessarily related to Second Temple Jewish writings, and furthermore, to the Old Testament. And as the theory of comparative literature teaches, the special contribution intertextual analysis can provide is not primarily in the simple observation of thematic relatedness or analogical expressions. Instead, intertextuality brings to the fore the particular identity and unique nature of the text in question. Through similarities it speaks of differences.<sup>210</sup>

It is most surprising that, in the end, Räisänen's hermeneutical theory could be called intertextual, were it not so dependent on reductionist historicism. Räisänen speaks about the flow of tradition and even about the changes that a new situation produces. His idea of the chain of interpretation concerns both the continuity of a chain and the discontinuity that the new interpretation brings along. In this respect, Räisänen's theory could well be applied to how the first Christians constructed their soteriological conviction about Jesus' deliverance of the slaves of sin. There is a thematic unity with the Temple cult, but simultaneously, it is quite exceptional that Jesus' death is seen as sacrificial atonement. There is intertextuality in the New Testament interpretation of Jesus' work. Tradition is given new meanings where Jesus' personal impact on his followers has made them reinterpret their previous Jewish eschatological beliefs. Räisänen could have presented a similar description of early Christian beliefs but he has not, and the reason is simple: his Weberian sociology prevents him from emphasizing issues that he considers too traditional or conservative.

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<sup>210</sup> I would like to refer for instance to works such as Allen, *Intertextuality* (2000).

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### A CHAIN OF INTERPRETATION OR A SEMIOTIC CATHEDRAL?

Räsänen's views have had a great impact on Gerd Theissen who, in his *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World (A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion)*, 1999), adopts similar starting points for his explanation of early theology. In the detailed application of his approach, however, he does not quite follow Räsänen's lead in distancing himself from dogmatic tradition. Theissen remains unique in present scholarship because he is the only one who has attempted to apply the Wre-dean approach to postmodern semiotics. Therefore, his reading deserves a chapter of its own.<sup>1</sup>

#### 7.1. *Encountering Theissen's Semiotic Theory*

Superficially speaking, Räsänen agrees with Theissen in most of what he writes. He also applauds the latter's point of departure when describing and assessing Theissen's book in the *Beyond*.

It is Gerd Theissen's recent *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* that really opens a new, long-awaited chapter in the history of the discipline. Theissen sets out to give "a scholarly description and analysis of primitive Christian religion," seeking to describe its content in such a way that it is "accessible to men and women whether or not they are religious," unlike New Testament theologies which "present an internal Christian perspective" and are written for Christians (iii).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Theissen's book has been published under two different titles and, therefore, scholars do refer to the same book even though they use different names. I have chosen to use the informative U.S. (Fortress) title, even though the other one no doubt translates the original more accurately: *Eine Theorie der urchristlichen Religion* (Gütersloher, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond* 2nd ed., 142. The quotations have been taken from the beginning of the preface, European version p. iii (in the U.S. version p. xiii). What Räsänen is too shy to notify, Theissen also gives credit to his role in scholarship: "But there are related efforts in exegesis: the New Testament scholar Heikki Räsänen and I had the idea of such a description of primitive Christian religion independently of each other. Our accounts will prove different. But we are both of the opinion that scholarly communication is possible and necessary beyond the frontiers of particular religious positions." Theissen, *Religion*, xiii–xiv.

Even the quotations inside the above-mentioned section could come from Räsänen's own pen. Primitive Christian religion is also his main subject when studying the thought world of early Christianity. They both attempt to find a non-religious approach accessible to all men and women. And they both avoid an "internal" Christian perspective. It is no wonder that the editorial paratext (blurb) in the cover of the second edition of Räsänen's *Beyond* says: "As might be expected, the reception for this radical thesis has been a mixed one, but the importance Professor Räsänen's work has been strongly emphasized, not least by Professor Gerd Theissen in his recent *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*."<sup>3</sup>

The reference to Theissen is correct. In his *Religion* he takes up three essential characteristics, as well as three further definitions concerning the method. The former are: (1) It distances itself from the *normative claim* of religious texts, (2) It goes beyond the limits of the *canon*, (3) It emancipates itself from the categories of 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy': all currents in primitive Christianity are regarded as equally justified in principle.<sup>4</sup> The latter, in turn, comprise: (1) The recognition of the *plurality* and contradictory nature of the theological schemes in primitive Christianity, (2) The interpretation of theological ideas in the light of their *context in real life*, (3) Openness towards the *history of religion*: primitive Christian religion is seen in its interaction with other religions.<sup>5</sup>

In the light of such polite homages one might expect there to be a close affinity between these two scholars. The only problem with such a partnership is that Räsänen himself never adopts a semiotic view on language and writing, i.e. texts. It seems that the only uniting factor here is a common attitude towards primitive Christian religion. Regarding the theory itself, there is almost nothing that unites Räsänen and Theissen. Certain pragmatical examples will prove this.

Theissen is a poststructuralist who also applies true literary methods in his study. Above all, he treats religion as a semiotic sign system. He is not the first to do this but, admittedly, he is one of the inaugurators of a new line of study.

Religion is first of all a *semiotic* phenomenon. In saying this we part company with other definitions of religion. We do not say that it is experience

<sup>3</sup> As noted, in the cover of the second edition, in Räsänen, *Beyond 2nd ed.* Theissen, in turn, presents a lengthy treatment of Räsänen's theory in the first footnotes of his book, see Theissen, *Religion*, 323–324 fn. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 323.

<sup>5</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 324. Italics follow the original.

of the holy. Nor do we say that it is a human projection. We say that it is an objective sign system.<sup>6</sup>

Making the sign system the focus of investigation does not yet separate Theissen from Räsänen's sociology of knowledge. We have argued above that Räsänen, in his hermeneutics, makes a strong effort to apply Berger's and Luckmann's poststructuralist views to his own writing. What Theissen calls cultural signs, Räsänen calls a symbolic world. There could be a point of contact here.

Theissen goes further, though. He excludes personal experience from the field of interpretation. Religion, for Theissen, is not constituted by experiences of the holy. Instead, Theissen focuses on language. This is what separates him from Räsänen. The latter assumes that meanings are personal and belong to the interpretive power of the human mind. This is somewhat of a psychological, mentalist position. The former, however, believes that meanings are mere functions of a collective sign system. In semiotic theory, these views are usually thought to be mutually exclusive.<sup>7</sup>

This is actually a crucial point that can help us make useful distinctions between their theories on an even larger scale. Above we have noted that the influential scholar Bultmann believed that religious meaning could be separated from mythical language. He sought a method for explicating meanings that would surpass semantics. Räsänen assumes that religious experience precedes religious language. For him language is secondary, always contextual and time-bound. This, surprisingly, is also what unites him with Bultmann, as we have seen. They both believe that the semantic meaning of religious language has no real reference. They also assume that the verbalization of experience produces corrupt expressions that have no proper semantic significance.

Theissen, however, believes that religion is nothing but language. It is a cultural phenomenon, a semiotic system. It is filled with myths, rites and ethical conceptions. But what is important to note already in this phase is that he holds that religion can be investigated and assessed only on the level of discourse.

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<sup>6</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Stating this means going into infinitesimal detail, though. Byrskog says that precisely in Theissen's system "the function of religion is primarily psychological and social." Byrskog, *Moving Beyond*, 204. Byrskog is right of course, in the sense that, on the psychological level, "religion offers possibilities to interpret the world in cognitive ways." Nevertheless, Theissen emphasizes semiotics whereas Räsänen, following Berger, focuses completely on the cognitive aspect in his hermeneutics.

Human beings cannot exist in their environment as they find it. They have to change it. They do that on the one hand by work and technology, and on the other by interpretation. The interpretation of the world is carried out by systems of interpretation: by common sense in everyday life; by science, art and religion.<sup>8</sup>

In a sense, for Theissen, there is nothing real beyond language, at least not real in the sense that language could properly refer to it. Should one want to study religion, it is a matter of investigating religious language. "Such signs and sign-systems do not alter the reality signified, but our cognitive, emotional and pragmatic relationship to it: they guide our attention, bring our impressions together coherently, and link them with actions."<sup>9</sup> Religious discourse is, above all, a myth: "The myth of the fundamental acts of God was extended through history to the present; it became a narrative of salvation history which also covered the present."<sup>10</sup> The reality or truth of a myth is inside the language game itself.

But what does Theissen mean with semiotics? As he belongs to the first proponents to introduce this methodology in biblical studies, his views must be assessed even more carefully than usual. Semiotics is not a unified field. One cannot find one simple definition of a sign, nor can one speak of one theory of semiotics. Instead, semiotics has a long history and there are several competing currents inside the discipline. Where does Theissen stand in relation to the theory of semiotics?

### 7.2. *On Defining Semiotics*

The study of semiotics is a challenging arena. It is not always easy to know what different authors believe. Therefore, before discussing different theories, it is best to start with Theissen himself. First of all, Theissen speaks of a closed system. Signs form a system of signs, in this case a linguistic system. Therefore language and meaning have also a systemic character. This system has one particular feature, though. Theological meaning never reaches outside the system itself.

If we regard religion as a sign language, we are giving it not just a semiotic but also a *systemic* character: we know today that "signs" can perform their task only in relation and opposition to other signs. Together they form a

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<sup>8</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 3.



“system.” Together the signs and forms of expression of a religion also form a sign system, a unitary “language” which is guided by particular rules, just as a language is governed by grammar and vocabulary.<sup>11</sup>

Theissen speaks of signs referring merely to other signs. Meanings, in a system, are just functions the sign performs inside the system. This, of course, is a poststructuralist version of Saussurean semiotics, and this is what we must soon take under scrutiny. Before doing that, one essential problem must first be dealt with. Theissen drifts into trouble with his semiotic theory because he attempts to keep his approach separate from postmodernism. In the preface he rejects postmodernism as subjectivism that is unable to communicate with or contribute to scholarship: “The postmodern mentality is not at all favourable to such an attitude.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, in his theory Theissen states that signs can perform their task “only in relation and opposition to other signs.” Since they form a sign system, meanings are completely dependent on the system. Theissen adopts a Derridean view.

This is how we end up with the first major issue in Theissen’s approach that needs to be discussed. There are several ways to classify different currents in semiotic theory, and especially the semiotics of the linguistic sign. Some theories are interested in a linguistic perspective. Following Ferdinand de Saussure scholars often define both the place and nature of the sign. Saussure’s most important distinction was between a linguistic system and its factual manifestations.<sup>13</sup>

For Saussure, *langue* is a system of language, a system of forms and grammar, and it is located in the mind of all speakers of the present community. *Parole* in turn, refers to factual utterances which make practical language possible. Every speaker uses the code of *langue* in order to express his or her ideas. In his definition Saussure makes a distinction between physical factors (sound waves), physiological factors, and psychological factors (the treatment of sound patterns in the mind). This distinction helped

<sup>11</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, xiii. Räisänen also notes this: “Against the post-modern mentality, Theissen is convinced that ‘scholarly communication is possible and necessary beyond the frontiers of particular religious positions.’” Räisänen, *Beyond 2nd ed.*, 142.

<sup>13</sup> Harris refers to Engler’s edition and remarks that Saussure himself uses the term *langue* with at least two different meanings (actually there are even more). Firstly, he refers to language in general. Secondly, it is a technical term referring to the linguistic system. The latter is translated by Harris as *the language*, or *linguistic structure*, or *linguistic system*. Harris complains, however, that Saussure is not quite consistent in his use of the term. See his translator’s introduction, *Course*, xiii.

him to separate sound patterns from voices as such. "The word patterns are psychological, just as the concepts associated with them are."<sup>14</sup>

Speech, *parole*, concerns language's physical factors, the production of speech, and also its psychological aspect. Therefore, the actual linguistic system, *langue*, is that totality of word patterns which socially connects all people speaking the same language. Within this collective system, signs (signifiers) will be connected with particular concepts in a linguistic community. Saussure has maintained a strong sociological approach to language. As Deely has put it: "For Saussure, the 'science' of signs was to be a branch of social psychology and linguistics a subspecies within that branch, albeit the most important one."<sup>15</sup> Linguistic signs are not abstractions. They are linguistic facts. "The associations, ratified by collective agreement, which go to make up the language are realities localised in the brain."<sup>16</sup>

Saussure's views have important philosophical implications. His focusing on the system proves that the problems of classical ontology have now been abandoned. According to Saussure, concepts are not universals but parts of a system. Furthermore he criticizes traditional nominalist signification theory for linking a thing and a name. "A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the meaning of a word cannot be based on a sound pattern that is uttered. Meaning belongs to the social system behind it. Furthermore, the sound pattern needs to be separated from actual uttering. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound. It is being produced by the senses. It is "material" merely in the way that it is a representation of a sensation. In addition to this, it must be separated from abstract concepts.<sup>18</sup>

Semiotic vocabulary mostly derives from Saussure, as well. A dyadic view of the sign is composed of the sound pattern, *signifiant*, signifier, and the concept, *signifié*, signified.<sup>19</sup> One must emphasize that, according to Saussure, any linguistic sign is constructed of these two elements, the concept and its signifier. For Saussure, signs are facts of language. A distinction between different signs is essential for the system, however. The first

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<sup>14</sup> Saussure, *Course*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Deely, *Basics of Semiotics*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Saussure, *Course*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Saussure, *Course*, 66.

<sup>18</sup> Saussure was interested merely in speech. Writing added a foreign element into the picture. No writing can imitate sounds in a proper way. *Course*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Saussure, *Course*, 66–67.

thing to note is that the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary: “the signal is *unmotivated*: that is to say arbitrary in relation to its signification, with which it has no natural connexion in reality.”<sup>20</sup> Any sequence of sounds/letters may act as a signifier. Furthermore, the concepts are dependent on a particular *langue*. In different languages they may (as general concepts) represent reality in a slightly different manner. Therefore, etymology no longer explains everything in linguistic studies. What is important for Saussure is that in one *langue* each unit, each sign, must differ from others (like shades of blue, or widths of rivers). But signs do not necessarily differ from each other in the same manner as in other languages.

For Saussure, signs do thus form a language system and their fields of meaning are dependent on each other. This, however, is not quite what Theissen meant. Theissen is of the opinion that signs have meaning only in terms of the system itself. Signs refer only to other signs and function inside the system. This is not what Saussure said because he preserved the object in the process of signification. It just was not part of the sign itself. Furthermore, Theissen identifies a whole language system with a restricted discourse, i.e. that of religious language. These kinds of developments do not derive from Saussure’s linguistic theory. They have been born much later.

Saussure’s theory was influential but it did not remain intact. In the phenomenological tradition it was interpreted in terms of epistemology. Derrida, in the footsteps of Husserl, stated that signs do not refer to objects. As we saw in the previous chapters, he believes that signs only refer to phenomena—interpreted experiences of this world. For Derrida, there was no link between a linguistic sign and the objects of the world which we live in.

Many details in Derrida’s theory are relevant for Theissen’s semiotics. What is important is Derrida’s conception about the nature of the sign itself. At this point we must include some other features in Derrida’s conception of the linguistic sign. Reading Husserl, Derrida states that people are directed to phenomena. Like Husserl, he believes that the intentional consciousness experiences the phenomenon as “given.” For an interpreter, it is always a personal reality. Even though language (or the linguistic sign) always has its indicative level because the language system exists

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<sup>20</sup> Saussure, *Course*, 69. Later this term became essential to scholars since in poststructuralism it was used as justification for relativistic meaning. See e.g. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, 16–19.

everywhere, the expressive function of language means that the speaking subject wishes to express itself. "One would thus be assured that the meaning (*Bedeutung*) is always what a discourse or somebody *wants to say*."<sup>21</sup>

This explains why meaning, for Husserl, is never merely a Kantian, rational issue. It does not belong to the noumenal sphere. Meaning itself cannot be merely an object of thinking or reasoning. This results in an important distinction in phenomenology (for the theory's sake): thinking and knowledge are separate things. Meaning, for Husserl, is something that the phenomenon produces. It is constructed when the phenomenon is experienced. Furthermore, this is why both Husserl and Derrida can say that expressive meaning in particular concerns the meaning of phenomena. What is left is the indicative meaning that concerns all possible referring that takes place outside the *epokhē*, the phenomenological reduction. There must be a restriction, however: human knowledge concerns merely the reality of phenomena. This is why indicative meaning becomes useless in the process.<sup>22</sup>

These ideas lead to the core of Husserl's theory of meaning. Intentional acts of consciousness have a structure of meaning, a "noematic structure," or simply a *noema*, as Derrida calls it. When a mental act is directed at an object, for instance at a book or at a computer, the mode of directedness is always constructed by a *noema*. Or, to keep it simple, a *noema* is being constructed every time a mental act is directed at an object. As a result, each different *noema* has a "meaning" on the grounds of which it is linked to the object. So it is not the object itself which directs meaning, but the way the object manifests itself as a phenomenon. Therefore, the structure of meaning is constantly changing, since it depends on the changing manifestation.<sup>23</sup>

Husserl himself mostly ignores the language system. He is a Kantian in the sense that he treats meanings mainly as meanings of judgments. Meanings are produced when people investigate the appearance of manifestations. In other words, the structure of meaning does not produce a word. It does

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<sup>21</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 18. Husserl made a distinction between expressive language and indicative language. Only expressive language has an intentional meaning in the sense that phenomenology understands it.

<sup>22</sup> Why does Husserl work with these two functions of language? He never says that some signs as such would be expressive and others indicative. Rather, the entire language, according to Husserl, seems to have an indicative level. Theoretical language outside the phenomenological reduction is indicative. This is why, for Husserl, only the language of intentional consciousness is expressive and has a meaning (*Bedeutung*).

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 19.

not produce a linguistic sign which naturally exists already in the system of signs. Instead, it produces a meaning in a sentence or judgment. Words, in this theory, are merely material tools that are exploited when thoughts are expressed. This detail will be quite important when assessing Derrida's grammatology. Husserl's view of language is drawn from pre-Saussurean times and has nothing to do with structuralism.<sup>24</sup>

All this produces a tension that affects Derrida's thinking. He builds on Husserl's phenomenology and uses the idea of the structure of meaning. In this context, however, the nature of sign and the status of the system of signs become problematic. Furthermore, Derrida accepts Saussure's point of departure and agrees that a novel philosophy of language needs to be based on structuralism. Hence, Derrida wants to unite Saussure and Husserl. This produces theoretical difficulties and tensions.

The essential problem is quite simple. If, according to Husserl and Derrida, meaning is constructed in each intentional act according to the respective *noema*, in a Saussurean system that meaning must be regarded as a concept or a signified (*signifié*). In that case the signifier (*signifiant*) cannot be a merely arbitrary sound pattern marking each concept, because no one has their own purely subjective system of language. Therefore, in Derridean phenomenology, the signifier becomes an independent entity, a sign of some system—but it is not the system Saussure writes about.

In other words, in Derrida's theory of language the collective language system is transferred from the category of signs to the category of signifiers. This aspect is contrary to Saussure's purposes. The reason for such a change can be found in Husserl's rather simple, pre-Saussurean linguistic view of language: words as signs stand for their objects. He adopts the nominalistic theory of primitive reference, which was discussed earlier in this study. A sign exists as an autonomic and independent entity in the linguistic system, and so it can also represent the meanings of different intentional acts. The word gets the status of a signifier, and the object is considered its meaning.<sup>25</sup>

One can see that there is a difference between Derrida and Saussure. For Saussure, the language system is a system of meanings where the emphasis is on the concept (the signified) itself. Derrida's language system is a

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<sup>24</sup> Saussure's innovative idea was exactly the opposite. Signifier and signified belong together, and one cannot exist without the other. Husserl does not yet have such a view, and Derrida speculates widely on its details.

<sup>25</sup> This is how Derrida interprets Husserl's concept of sign. See Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 50.

system of symbols where ever changing meanings can be connected with the system's signs according to differing structures of meaning.<sup>26</sup> This is how signs (properly: signifiers) have become names of *noemata*.

In the history of semiotics this change is a transition to poststructuralism. The result is close to what Theissen above said of semiotics: "we know today that 'signs' can perform their task only in relation and opposition to other signs." Not only signs but also meanings are defined in relation or opposition to other signs. The sign system has thus been defined in terms of an epistemological view. Meanings are no longer related to objects but merely to interpretations.

Theissen's semiotics belong to the poststructuralist tradition. He is inclined to state that religious language does not refer outside the system itself. This is why he also said above: "Together the signs and forms of expression of a religion also form a sign system, a unitary 'language'." He speaks of a religious discourse that becomes understandable only in terms of the game itself. Theissen, thus, adopts the Derridean interpretation of Saussurean linguistics.

This, of course, is not the only way to understand the nature of sign. Not much about this can be said here, but two comments are necessary. Firstly, the Saussurean tradition proper—apart from the Derridean branch—later turned into structuralism. Meaning in this theory is not arbitrary, and it still has to do with objects. Saussure did state that linguistic signs, like general concepts in a language system, do often relate to each other. There must not be much overlapping: the system is as economical as it can be. This can be seen, for instance in the signs concerning colors. But one must not confuse the arbitrariness of signifiers with any alleged arbitrariness of concepts (the signified). The dyadic sign—any word—as a general concept is then applied to some object. Meaning, for Saussure, comprises all of these elements. He was no phenomenologist. Structuralist semiotics can easily be applied to narratology or rhetorical analysis. In this way it is a useful tool also for the investigation of New Testament theology, but in quite another sense, as Theissen suggests.

Secondly, the entire Peircean tradition has created a pragmatist version of semiotics. It treats semiotics as a theory of signification processes (semiosis). For Peirce, signs are the main tool that human beings use

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<sup>26</sup> Rapaport comments that this is the nature of Derrida's reception of Heidegger. When he exploits Heidegger's terminology and transfers it to structuralism in his writings in the 1960s, "the sign becomes the site where the undecideability of *différance* is disclosed as the movement in time of signification." Rapaport, *Heidegger*, 186.

when interpreting reality. Linguistic signs, of course, are but a small part of the field but they too have their individual features. Peirce's main interest lies in the signification processes, though. He wished to sort out how thought processes develop and what precisely is the sign's role in this.<sup>27</sup> Considering our investigation it should not be forgotten, however, that Derrida has also affected the interpretation of Peirce's semiotics. This may prove important in explaining the views Theissen has adopted, as we later discuss Peirce's ideas in detail. Before that, however, some comments on the genesis of Theissen's semiotic views must be made.

### 7.3. Consulting Geertz

How should one understand Theissen's view on semiotics? He has undoubtedly accepted a poststructuralist tradition here but he never mentions Derrida or any of the French poststructuralists from the 1960s. Instead, Theissen quotes Clifford Geertz, a U.S. anthropologist who developed a symbolic anthropology. Therefore, the principles Theissen uses in semiotics will be seen later.

Geertz inspired Theissen to present a threefold definition of religion "as (1) cultural sign language which (2) corresponds to an ultimate reality and (3) promises a gain in life." With a direct quotation Theissen completes his definition:

According to him, religion is "a symbol system aimed at creating strong, comprehensive and lasting moods and motivations in people by formulating notions of a universal order of being and surrounding these notions with such an aura of activity that the moods and motivations seem to correspond completely to reality."<sup>28</sup>

It is probably important to note that Theissen is not building on the Weberian tradition, while Geertz is. He speaks of signs and states that

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<sup>27</sup> Peirce's semiotics, admittedly, are not easy to understand. I refer here to certain main ideas, though, found easily in Peirce's writings in *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings. Volume 2*. See also Greenlee, D., *Peirce's Concept of Sign*; and the collection *Peirce's Doctrine of Signs: Theory, Applications, and Connections*, edited by V.M. Colapietro and Th.M. Olschewsky.

<sup>28</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 324 fn. 2; referring to Geertz's article "Religion as a Cultural System," in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 90. Geertz in fact develops the Weberian sociology of religion by taking it in directions similar to Berger's. For them both religion is, above all, a mental structure dealing with symbols.



he has simplified Geertz's views and given them a somewhat more direct semiotic content.

Instead of a symbol system I speak of a sign system, since 'symbols' in the stricter sense (like the 'cross') are only a particularly complex kind of sign, and while imperatives like 'You shall not kill' are linguistic 'signs', they are not 'symbolic' (in the narrower sense). He does not want to speak of moods and motivations either but, instead, suggests the definition "corresponds to an ultimate reality."<sup>29</sup>

Theissen departs from Geertz's views quite substantially since he changes the latter's main idea of religion as something that formulates notions of a universal order. Theissen wants to be more personal and suggests a pragmatic motive: religion promises "an improvement, preservation or intensification" of life. The reason for this kind of difference is that Geertz has presented a strictly sociological theory, as we shall see below.

There is an interesting change taking place here. In many respects, Geertz is nearer to Räsänen than Theissen. As he is interested in interpreting culture, in his seminal work *The Interpretation of Cultures* (quoted also by Theissen) he defines culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."<sup>30</sup> Even though Geertz is not known for any close affinity with the sociology of knowledge, his theory comes close to that used by Räsänen. Berger and Luckmann treated culture and religion through symbolic forms, even though they had adopted a more poststructuralist way of thinking.

One evident point of contact between Geertz's theory and Theissen's view of semiotics can be found, though, and it is Wittgenstein. Geertz has adopted his idea of a private language, the language game, and used it in explaining complex cultural circumstances. For Geertz, "Culture is public because meaning is," just as Wittgenstein suggested.<sup>31</sup> But this is not the whole story. One should not forget that, as regards the interpretation of religion for instance, Geertz had learned much from Weber. Anthropology, for Geertz, was an interpretative social science, as sociology was for Weber.

The concept of culture I espouse, and whose utility the essays below attempt to demonstrate, is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber,

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<sup>29</sup> Theissen, continuing the same footnote, *Religion*, 325.

<sup>30</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 89.

<sup>31</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 12.

that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, Theissen could drift into problems also here since, in his anthropology, Geertz actually rejected Claude Levi-Strauss's structuralism. Geertz was interested in symbols, of course, but he disagreed with Levi-Strauss over their role and explanation. As Geertz was no strict semiotician, he attempted to use symbols in explaining social processes. With his emphasis Geertz actually stands against Theissen's ideas when he states: "Whatever, or wherever, symbol systems 'in their own terms' may be, we gain empirical access to them by inspecting events, not by arranging abstract entities into unified patterns."<sup>33</sup> Geertz is especially interested in roles. Therefore he assumes that symbols do not get their meaning from their relationships with each other, as the structuralists claim. They get their meaning from the roles they play in people's lives.

Geertz's criticism can be directed against Theissen in every detail. In his *Religion* the latter keeps arranging abstract entities into unified patterns. For Theissen it is all about language. "Together the signs and forms of expression of a religion also form a sign system, a unitary 'language' which is guided by particular rules" (see above). Theissen has turned Geertz's cultural anthropology into semiotics. It is not clear how he has done this, however. Theissen never explicates his theory of semiotics. He just refers to sign theory by an enigmatic clause: "we know today" that signs perform their task in a certain way. Such indefiniteness is unfortunate because it is precisely this "generally known" view that justifies Theissen's thorough reinterpretation of Geertz's theory.<sup>34</sup>

Fortunately we are in a situation where it is possible to locate Theissen's view in the history of semiotics—as we have done above. As a poststructuralist semiotician he treats the language system as a closed system of meanings. His views are quite strict. According to Theissen, no meaning refers outside language itself. This is the reason why, for Theissen, religious language is an autonomous discourse.

In the end, however, one should probably be a little more critical about his views. Can Theissen remain consistent in adopting both poststructuralist

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<sup>32</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 4–5.

and science-of-religion premises in his theory? Where does the logic of his theory lead? One could settle with Theissen's claim that he does not attempt a reduction of religious belief: for him religion is not merely a human projection. He wishes to treat religion as an objective sign system. Therefore, he also attempts to inspect the "grammar" of primitive Christian sign language. What betrays him, however, is his concept of sign. The principles of poststructuralism force Theissen into reduction: religion is merely about discourses. This is what unites his views with those of Räsänen. But, paradoxically, Theissen's ambivalence about the sociology of religion simultaneously distances him from Räsänen's position.

Therefore, based on this analysis, it is not quite clear what Theissen means with his exploitation of Geertz's theory. Geertz himself apparently remains in the Weberian tradition and investigates notions of a universal order. Theissen gives in to poststructuralism and ends up with closed linguistic systems. As he refers also to Wittgenstein, the question about language games comes into the picture. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate Theissen's relation to Wittgenstein in more detail.

#### 7.4. *Wittgenstein, Lindbeck, and Theissen*

Wittgenstein reappears in Theissen's theory as the latter moves on with his explanation. The second important issue to be discussed for Theissen's theory concerns his view of the "grammar of religious language." As we saw earlier, according to Theissen, signs and different forms of expression of a religion assemble "a sign system, a unitary 'language' which is guided by particular rules, just as a language is governed by grammar and vocabulary."

Such a grammar works like linguistic grammar: we learn it like the rules of our mother tongue and use everywhere without conscious awareness of its existence. "Like other grammars, the grammar of religious language consists of positive and negative rules of association, i.e. indications of what one may or may not combine."<sup>35</sup> Theissen adds that there are several different religious grammars, those of Judaism, Muslim or Christian sign language. Therefore grammar has actually to do with content, not with rules. He does not mean that these religions would have different rules in formulating beliefs, but they have different "rules" of religion.

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<sup>35</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 4.

This is why Theissen adopts Dietrich Ritschl's conception of "implicit axioms" and adds the literary notion of "basic motifs" to the picture. He is also a narratologist. He is primarily interested in how the sign system *as a* narrative entity works. Implicit axioms are regulative statements that direct thought even though they themselves are not explicit in the text itself. What can be seen in the narrative are basic motifs:

In addition there are many individual *basic motifs*, i.e. grammatical rules of religious language, which have only a limited scope. They are subordinate to the fundamental axioms and are organized in the light of these axioms: the motifs of creation, wisdom, repentance, love of neighbour, distance from God, etc.<sup>36</sup>

Theissen assumes that, on the level of language, religion is a linguistic phenomenon. It can be assessed on the basis of its motifs that aim both at a good life and at something behind the material reality. This is also what the new history of religion should study: "Religion is a cultural sign language which promises a gain in life by corresponding to an ultimate reality."<sup>37</sup> At the end of his book Theissen lists both the most important axioms and the most important motifs, the axioms being monotheism and belief in a redeemer. There are several different motifs: the creation motif, the wisdom motif, the motifs of miracle, alienation, and renewal, as well as the motifs of faith and agape-love, to name a few.<sup>38</sup>

The most important methodological concept for Theissen is "grammar of religious language." As we saw, this "grammar" did not really have to do with rules that produce beliefs but rules that direct doctrines and the whole set of beliefs. This kind of idea Theissen had learned from the Yale dogmatician George A. Lindbeck. Lindbeck in his *The Nature of Doctrine* had developed a method for ecumenical consultations. He attempted to find a conceptual level where different doctrines could be compared and even adjusted.

The religions are languages in which such implicit axioms form a grammar by which, among other things, associations and inconsistencies are determined. This notion of a grammar of faith comes from George A. Lindbeck.<sup>39</sup>

Lindbeck belongs at least loosely to the Yalean narrativist school in the footsteps of Hans Frei and his colleagues Paul Holmer, Brevard Childs and

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<sup>36</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 2; cf. 7, 17.

<sup>38</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 273–281.

<sup>39</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 327.

David Kelsey. Learning both from linguistic approaches and Wittgenstein's philosophy Lindbeck attempts to find a proper method that could answer how doctrines work in societies. He is convinced that doctrines do not behave in the way people usually assume them to behave. Lindbeck suggests that in order to understand the real nature of doctrine, one has to study how it *functions* in a religion.<sup>40</sup>

After this point of departure Lindbeck proposes three different ways to assess doctrines. The traditional ecclesial interpretation focuses on cognitive features and clings to a pre-modern view of religion.<sup>41</sup> He calls it a cognitive-propositional view that holds doctrines as truth claims of a certain reality. The dogmatic scholarship of Western Churches then encountered the rise of scientific research and attempted adjust its views according to the changing situation. Meaning was separated from the texts themselves, and interpretation emphasized experience. This produced an experiential-expressive view according to which doctrines are but poetic descriptions of religious experience or explications of feelings and values.<sup>42</sup>

Whatever the alternatives, the proponents of this tradition suggest that anything that is held to be valuable in a religion precedes thinking and is located *in the prereflective experiential depths of the self*. The nature of religion and the function of religion is illumination and the reinstating of the feeling of absolute dependence. The features of a religion, for them, are thus non-discursive symbols of inner experience.<sup>43</sup>

Lindbeck's own alternative is a cultural-linguistic interpretation where meanings are returned to the narratives. He holds that religions are value systems just like cultures. They strive after a semiotic construction of reality and human life. Lindbeck adopts the principles of sociological structuralism and states that religions resemble language as they both correlate with different forms of life. This, of course, is not the view that Theissen held above. In the poststructuralist version words refer only to other words. In the sociological version, which strangely enough is popular among poststructuralists, signs and language reflect the structures of reality. This is the line that cultural anthropology has—for understandable

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<sup>40</sup> Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 18.

<sup>41</sup> Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 16. DeHart remarks that Lindbeck borrows here the ideas of Geertz and Berger and also applies the theory of sociology of knowledge according to which communities are believed to treat meanings in terms of collective symbols. DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 67.

<sup>42</sup> Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 16–17.

<sup>43</sup> Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 21.

reasons—supported and many postmodern moralists still accept. Such details need to be discussed in more detail, but that must wait.

First we need to see what Lindbeck says about doctrines in the light of this last principle. Since he states that religions resemble languages he concludes that the real function of doctrines is in their directing role. They are authoritative rules of speech, attitudes and action.<sup>44</sup> This is where Wittgenstein becomes important. Lindbeck assumes that religious systems of belief are language games that have inner consistency. Both linguistic signs and non-linguistic signs together form a religious discourse that is directed by a grammar, the inner logic of the religion. Therefore doctrines have their “intrasystemic truth” despite the fact that scholars could not hold these as objective truths in a traditional sense.<sup>45</sup>

Behind this discussion there is a difficult debate over the nature of Wittgenstein’s late philosophy of language: is he speaking about referential language that applies to all speech, or does he just mean the everyday speech that must be separated from genuine philosophical speech—the one he has so carefully studied in his earlier investigations? Such a problem cannot be solved here completely but suffice it to say that, at least in Lindbeck’s reading, the language attaining mere “intrasystemic truth” does not strive after referential truth proper in the British empirical or logical-positivist sense.<sup>46</sup>

Religious discourse clothed in myths, narratives and rites, for Lindbeck, is an integrated whole, but it has to be practiced. Proclamation gains power and meaning “insofar as it is embodied in the total gestalt of community life and action.” He speaks about an intratextual interpretation where the entire human reality is interpreted in terms of biblical narratives. In other words: significant features of reality can be found in these narratives.<sup>47</sup>

It is justified to ask, however, whether Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic interpretation is just a liberal counterpart or reversal of the experiential-expressive interpretation. The experiential view assumes that an inner experience creates different forms of religion. Since the cultural interpretation

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<sup>44</sup> Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 33–35, 117.

<sup>46</sup> Wittgenstein is famous for stating that, outside strict logical language there is no true meaning in the philosophical sense. Scholars have debated whether he later rejected his views when writing about language, or just wished to see what kind of “intrasystemic” truth there could be in a discourse apart from the real philosophical truth of logical empiricism. Lindbeck’s reading suggests that the focus at least in this phase is on the discursive “truth” that means just logical consistency, not referential truth in any kind of reality.

<sup>47</sup> Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 35–36, 117.

states that myths and stories create experience, it just turns the logic of inference around. For Lindbeck, religion is like a perfect language that can be learned through cultural contact.<sup>48</sup>

Lindbeck's postliberal theory must face the challenge that another late modern Yalean approach poses, namely that of deconstructionism. When one transfers meanings into a language game and makes them just values in a closed system, referential meanings no longer have significance in the structure. Theological statements are only claims inside a particular game or discourse. Furthermore, the difficulties of this kind of approach are confirmed by the notion that Lindbeck himself would evidently deny even the attempt (to speak of referential meanings) of a return to the cognitive-propositional view.<sup>49</sup>

In Lindbeck's theory, thus, different features unite. He uses liberal criticism of signification, he quotes sociology of knowledge when speaking of symbols, and he clings to Wittgensteinian language games. Lindbeck himself attempts to solve the logical problems of his theory by stating that the rules of grammar are still propositions. Due to his theory he is compelled to admit that these are merely "second-order" propositions and, "affirm nothing about extra-linguistic or extra-human reality." Therefore, he is not able to escape the theoretical problem that Theissen also faces in his hermeneutics.<sup>50</sup> The basic problem of Lindbeck's hermeneutics, then, appears to be the question about whether doctrines are stable or not. He has attempted to argue that the idea of a grammar secures the doctrinal content. These same premises can, however, be used in order to justify a completely opposite conclusion: all hierarchies in a discourse can be held to be defective. Lindbeck's theory cannot uphold the view that hierarchies, structures of thought, could be seen unchanging.<sup>51</sup>

Postliberal currents can thus be shown to share similar problems. First of all, the hermeneutics of language games is dependent on an autonomic view of language and, in this respect, it is influenced by the poststructuralist

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<sup>48</sup> Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 34–36.

<sup>49</sup> According to Hütter, Lindbeck's theory is weak precisely in its treatment of the referential nature of language. Even though the theory attempts to advance dialogue, the theory itself is left outside such dialogue. Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 63–66.

<sup>50</sup> Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 80.

<sup>51</sup> This is probably why Lindbeck's view concerning the development of tradition resembles even that of Räsänen. "Religious traditions are not transformed, abandoned, or replaced because of an upwelling of new or different ways of feeling about the self, world, or God, but because a religious interpretive scheme (embodied, as it always is, in religious practice and belief) develops anomalies in its application in new experiences, even by the religion's own norms." Lindbeck, *Doctrine*, 39.



concept of meaning. Scholars seldom question this point of departure. Secondly, the sociology of knowledge theory, used also in these interpretations, separates the symbols dealing with rules of faith from referential everyday language.<sup>52</sup>

Since Theissen refers to Wittgenstein when speaking of his “grammar of religious language,” he apparently joins forces with the latter’s philosophy of language and the idea of language games. This makes Theissen a colleague of Lindbeck as they both attempt to overcome the hermeneutical problems of poststructuralism in terms of a kind of deep structure of religious language. If religion is only a semiotic system, a Weberian web of concepts, can one assume that the rules of the system work like doctrines of the religion—at least in a formal sense? Theissen follows his predecessors in assuming that this is also a semiotic way to solve the traditional problems of religious discourse. The weak point in this kind of reasoning is, however, that the theory itself remains poststructuralist. Nothing justifies the stability of a dogmatic game. Lindbeck probably aimed only at an ecumenical contribution since he wanted to find a theory that could explain the difference between common rules and diverse expressions among different confessional churches. Theissen is in deeper trouble as he attempts to explain the very nature of religion. His theory ends up with poststructuralist pluralism.

#### 7.5. *Between Semiotic Unity and Ecstatic Pluralism*

Theissen’s final aspiration differs from that of Räisänen. Theissen has used semiotics in order to be able to present the principles of Christian faith, the *grammar*, in a trustworthy way. “I have described primitive Christian religion as a sign system which the first Christians constructed on the basis of Jewish religion. They built a semiotic cathedral out of a narrative, ritual and ethical materials, a world of signs *and* a world in which to live.”<sup>53</sup>

In a sense, Theissen has attempted to define the path from ancient Judaism to early Christianity by focusing on changing signs and sign systems. Basic narrative, motifs, and rites needed to go through reformulation. “This basic narrative reformulates the messianic hopes of Judaism under the impact of the Jewish prophets and the charismatic Jesus of Nazareth.”

<sup>52</sup> See DeHart, *Trial of the Witnesses*, 186–187.

<sup>53</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 286.

(ibid.) For Theissen, de-mythologizing becomes re-mythologizing. "Here myth and history enter into a unity in tension."

This all results in a closed system of religious signs. Theissen's post-structuralist view wins in the end. This is neither a matter of truth nor a matter of making any distinction between mythology and theology. This is just a matter of signs. All religious systems are autonomic since this is how language-games work. In the manner of Lindbeck, Theissen attempts to combine poststructuralism with Wittgenstein. There is truth in Christian faith, but it remains inside the game.

The first Christians built their semiotic cathedral from the materials of this narrative, ritual and ethical sign world and the world in which they lived. With growing awareness they claimed *autonomy* for themselves: they were not just to be a subsidiary temple in a larger sanctuary, but an independent sanctuary which replaced all other sanctuaries.<sup>54</sup>

What is missing here, naturally, is the ability to communicate, even though it was one of the primary principles demanded by Theissen in his preface—and noted also by Räisänen. Intrasystemic truth cannot maintain its value outside the system. As long as meaning and truth are considered possible only inside a particular grammar, language game, or sign system, they cannot really communicate with other sign systems. Autonomy prevents interaction. This is also what Räisänen criticizes in Theissen's theory.

In Räisänen's reading, Theissen's *grammar* is not at all unified. He brings up Theissen's own testimony on the plurality of ideas.

Theissen himself emphasizes that primitive Christianity appears as a "seething chaos" of many groups, as a "plurality of currents," of which each continued to build on the common edifice "in a very arbitrary way." Nevertheless behind the plurality a hidden unity is to be found and it alone makes the birth of the canon understandable. "In, with and through the formation of the canon a consensus must have been arrived at about what is 'Christian' in the normative sense."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Theissen, *Religion*, 287.

<sup>55</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond 2nd ed.*, 143. Reading only Theissen might give one somewhat more positive picture, though. "Here I shall work out the plurality of primitive Christianity and gather indications of its unity in and behind all the multiplicity. Only this unity explains the formation of the canon, which succeeded in establishing itself in primitive Christianity in the course of the second century without any organized central authorities." Theissen, *Religion*, 250.

Here we have one more point where Räisänen and Theissen disagree. For Theissen, all early Christian groups shared two basic axioms, that of monotheism and faith in Jesus as the redeemer. Furthermore, there must have been shared basic motifs that were to make up the *grammar* of the religious sign language. But is this all? What about diversity? Räisänen attempts to find some uniting factor between Theissen and his own ideas. Plurality might be considered. "Nevertheless, Theissen regards the formation of the canon as a conscious confession to plurality." Also Theissen acknowledges that plurality is a fact.

But is this enough? Is Theissen already on the right track? Räisänen hesitates and distances himself: "The question is, can one have it both ways?" His main complaint is that Theissen does not admit to the basic chaos and "plurality of currents" that religious writings represent. With his narratological approach and belief in a religious grammar Theissen cannot see the basic diversity of early Christian thought.

According to Räisänen, the problem lies on the "ontological" level of religious language. One can no longer argue for a basic unity of early Christian theology because there is none. In this respect Räisänen is a nominalist, and Theissen reaches for a realist position. Are there real theological conceptions? Is there a grammar of religious thought? If there is one, there must be a relevant relation between rules and expressions. And this kind of reasoning, for Räisänen, involves too much conservative theology. He loves the idea of chaos and wishes that Theissen would proceed in that direction. As he does not, Räisänen states that he makes a mistake that ruins his theory.

In working out the "basic motifs," the "inner canon within the canon" (283), Theissen actually moves to a rather abstract level. Only so is he able to bring systemic order to the "chaos."<sup>56</sup>

Räisänen evidently concludes that Theissen falls into secondary rationalization. There is only chaos, and Theissen has seen its first signs. He does not take his inferences far enough though, as Räisänen himself has done. Instead, Theissen "brings," or imposes, systemic order to the situation violently. This is his basic fault, a ramification of the "basic motif" theory, language-centered poststructuralism that elevates the language system and makes it autonomic.

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<sup>56</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond 2nd ed.*, 144.

In the end, Räisänen accuses Theissen of what he actually stands for: for maintaining that meaning is dependent merely on a system of signs. Räisänen himself opposes autonomy. His history-of-religion approach demands it. No religious text can claim autonomy since the only authentic expression of religion is brought about by personal experience.

### 7.6. *Contribution to Contemporary Discussion VII*

Throughout this investigation we have discussed the new semantics, the nature of language, and the role of language philosophy. In contemporary scholarship these issues are further accompanied by semiotic theories. The question about meaning has once more become crucial in theology. This is important to note because, in the age of rationalism, meaning was considered self evident. Scholars widely believed that pure reason could easily understand everything it addresses. Meaning, be it the result of primitive reference or nature writing its message on the *tabula rasa*, was considered simple and unproblematic.

Now Räisänen alone faces a completely new situation with the new semantics on the one hand, and new developments in semiotics on the other. Meaning, understood in terms of linguistic theories, is a textual matter. It is not primarily an ideological, epistemological, logical-mathematical, or philosophical issue. All such premises that belong to the pre-understanding of reading naturally affect the result but, as we are interested in finding the core of the new approach, they do not dictate meanings apart from the semantic reality.

Even though it is not the task of the present study to develop a complete hermeneutical theory, it is useful to attend to the question about the nature of meaning. Many theories of biblical hermeneutics are not very sensitive to linguistic issues even though most of them comment on linguistic meaning. According to the views common in contemporary scholarly discussion, meaning comprises at least three or four different aspects or components. In what follows the main characteristics of these will be described, even though this will not be done in a very sophisticated manner. An analysis of meaning will be briefly described:

- (1) how words relate to other words and the linguistic system (especially in Saussurean semantics);
- (2) how words represent the object (especially in Peircean semiotics pointing out icon, index and symbol);

- (3) how words and expressions represent the ontological reality of the cosmos (metaphysics, asking: are categories real?);
- (4) how words and expressions represent theological reality and existence in its widest form (theology proper, asking: are theological concepts real?)

Theological hermeneutics needs to discuss all these levels. It is quite obvious that the choices scholars make on one level affect the entire theory they are constructing. As we have seen, throughout the history of research several debates concerning these issues have raged. In the area of semantics one has to decide between the diachronic (etymology) aspect and synchronic (language system) aspect. This is further complicated by the debate between nominalism and realism that has influenced hermeneutics for several centuries. Then we have the distinction between metaphysical and physical (materialist). No agreement has been reached between the adherents of these different approaches. This also has something to do with the disagreement concerning the relation of mythological and theological. Linguistic hermeneutics is filled with interesting questions that still allows for well argued and balanced answers.

How should one then understand the relation between the sign and the object, language and reality? There are at least three influential, fundamentally differing currents in recent language philosophy that affect theological investigation today. Poststructuralist theories tend to emphasize the autonomy of the language system, and Wittgensteinian programs celebrate language-games. As we have seen, these two look similar, at least on the surface. Opposing these nominalist currents we have the third, realist alternative: pragmatic semiotics, if you like. With the latter I am referring to structuralist semantics and the realist version of Peircean semiotics both in the U.S. and in Europe.<sup>57</sup>

As Theissen's example shows, the poststructuralist view attempts to justify theological language by making it a Christian discourse. It can be considered consistent in itself and, as it turns out to be consistent enough, one can accept it as a significant religious system that is informative to

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<sup>57</sup> It is common knowledge that Peirce, starting with a Kantian phenomenological tradition, was of the opinion that the struggle between realism and nominalism is the only significant dichotomy in the history of philosophy. Gradually, as his semiotics developed, Peirce grew into realism and stated that categories must be real. This is how his semiotics developed into pragmatic semiotics, and he wanted to create a hermeneutical system capable of interpreting reality—and even explaining how reality can be interpreted.

anyone who wishes to submit to it. What is clear, however, is that this kind of discourse is no longer communicative. Signs do not refer outside the system of signs. Statements are not true outside the discourse itself.

The Wittgensteinian alternative looks similar. A language-game is like a discourse, as the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard already assumed when identifying these two concepts. Words of the game are meaningful to anyone who takes part in the conversation and accepts the rules of the language-game. There is a danger here, however, that Wittgenstein himself, who *did not* identify the consistency of a language-game with the consistency of a perfect logical proposition, no longer believed that a language-game could refer to the real world. It no doubt refers to the mental world of the speakers, but one could hardly call that a true meaning.<sup>58</sup>

In this respect and in my understanding, Lindbeck's attempt to define and detect a grammar of religious language in Wittgensteinian terms cannot reach its goal. In his ecumenical theology Lindbeck tries to define the deep structure of Christian theology, where certain principles remain even though particular expressions change, but this does not go far enough. Lindbeck's propositions are true only inside the system. If the system changes, the meanings change. Lindbeck's theory cannot stand up to the challenge Räsänen's chain of interpretation throws at it. If a new interpretation conflicts with a previous one, as Räsänen assumes, no deep structure or grammar can save meaning from its deconstructive power.

The third alternative sounds better, however. Structuralist perspectives in a realist tradition believe that categories are real. Language itself is understood as a system of signs that are capable of representation. The representation itself, however, is not one of primitive reference. The signification of signs takes place in meaningful sentences. Therefore meaning, in the proper sense of the word, is a textual reality.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 18ff., 36–38.

<sup>59</sup> It is simultaneously easy and difficult to explain what realist structuralist semantics and semiotics are all about. It is Saussurean semiotics that still believes in the relation between sign and its object and often focuses on issues of communication or rhetoric (rhetorical narratology). The difficult part is that even Peircean pragmatic semiotics has been adapted to three different currents in recent philosophy. In addition to the "standard" realist pragmatism described above, Peircean semiotics has been read in the context of analytical philosophy which still bears at least some of the marks of logical empiricism or Wittgensteinian philosophy. Furthermore, in the U.S., pragmatic semiotics has sometimes been adapted to poststructuralist ideology (Rorty) where it has been made part of an autonomic view of language and meaning. Therefore, the three currents treated here actually affect the understanding of pragmatic semiotics.

Apart from this, any discussion of or speculation on the referential truth of theological sentences is a matter of ontology and world view. Epistemology is no hindrance here. In the realist view, human beings are able to postulate real conditions of the world and their own human existence. If some of these statements concern theology, and even statements about God, it is a matter of ideology to accept or abandon their reality. The construction of meaning is no longer a part of this discussion because this issue has already been settled. Meaning, at this point, is already known. It depends on the semantic structure of the sentence. Hermeneutics, therefore, is a matter of dealing with meanings, not of creating them.

As noted already in previous chapters, Räsänen does not treat this kind of question. His hermeneutics deal with the reality of theological language. In his immanent interpretation, Räsänen does not hold any theological proposition significant. It is important to note, however, that he does not hold the theological meaning invalid based on poststructuralist theory. Instead, he still believes that theological language is based on myth and, therefore, it has no reference in reality. Mythological discourse, for Räsänen, is just fictitious creation and, as such, part of immanent, human culture.

In the hermeneutical world of primitive reference, where Räsänen dwells, words stand for objects. As the meaning of a word is its object, religious and mythical language can never have proper meaning because there are no real objects. In the context of such a theory there is no *encoding* or *decoding*. Words and sentences are not understood as tools for communicating messages. This is why Räsänen never develops a hermeneutical theory for decoding the Christian message. For him, there is nothing to decode in biblical theology—and the reason for that is simple: reality, according to Räsänen, is understood today precisely in as it should have been understood before. Myths are mere stories. They are fictionalizings. The modern way to interpret them is *Entmythologisierung*. No other hermeneutical means is needed here.

Geertz and Lindbeck are on the right track, however, when stating that the interpretation of religion—history and theology for instance—is not about constructing laws. We are not dealing with events that could be reconstructed or conditions that could be reproduced in a laboratory. Instead, we are dealing with human thoughts and interpretation of ancient sources. What an interpreter attempts to do is to create reconstructions about the motives of human actions and aspirations of working



in a community. As noted before, truth, the historical truth that scholars deal with, is not about stones and ruins or nails and hammers. It is about attitudes, aims, and social relations. It is about motivations and convictions. And, therefore, is it also about beliefs and doctrines.

In scholarship, the issue of truth has always been a matter of ontology, and this is something one must not forget even in a hermeneutical discussion where views turn out to be rather black-and-white. Ontology and metaphysics have been dealt with in most of the prominent currents that have affected Räsänen's views during his career: the rationalists, the Deists, Hegel, Strauss, Bultmann, Heidegger, the Neo-Kantians, and Funk as well as Berger. Hence we can presume that ontology directs Räsänen's hermeneutical views.

Our a priori inferences about the nature of reality and existence of God dictates our views about theological truth and the meaning of biblical propositions. If this can be seen as the macro level of the construction of meaning, the micro level concerns semiotics. In language, in practical sentences, meaning is constructed in processes where several different factors affect the process itself. In recent scholarship, semiotics in particular has investigated such procedures.

To elaborate on the semiotic views affecting semantics, and advancing the discussion started in 3.7. above, one should pay heed to Peircean semiotics and its pragmatist, communicative view of interpretation. Peirce spoke of the signification process (semiosis) as a dynamical interaction of three different factors: sign, object and interpretant. Some scholars have suggested a semantic interpretation of this scheme, but it is clearly a false understanding of what Peirce meant. His triad does resemble the standard Ogden-Richards pattern of semantic structure but Peirce's main idea, as well as the function of the elements, is different. First of all, Peirce speaks of signs in general—not just linguistic signs. Secondly, one should note that he still speaks of the real object (as a realist, as we have noted before). Thirdly, and what is of special importance, he introduces the concept of *interpretant*. With this concept Peirce suggests that signs refer to objects always in "a certain respect." Meaning is not just a matter of lexical semantics—and not at all as a matter of simple conditions of truth, as logic has always claimed. Instead, meaning is something that is invested to signs by the interpretant in abundant processes. Meaning is a matter of inferences and thought processes. The interpretant, therefore, is not the same as lexical meaning but, instead, it is the applied meaning that

grows as people develop their ideas. Peirce, thus, is not interested in lexical semantics but in thought processes. This is what he calls *semiosis*.<sup>60</sup>

In a signification process, according to Peirce, a sign relates to a real object, with three main possibilities for how this relationship will be realized (in fact there are more but that is of no interest here). If the uniting factor is just a likeness, we get the *icon*. A circle can serve as an icon for the sun, for instance. If there is an existential factor involved, like smoke for the fire, we get an *index*. But if the representation is merely conventional and based on a mutual agreement, we get the *symbol*. Words, for Peirce, are usually symbols.<sup>61</sup>

The main contribution Peirce has made to hermeneutical theory, however, is that meanings in thought processes are not solely dependent on the lexical meaning of words. His theory resembles that of recent semantics: people do not create meanings just by collecting independent meaningful units of the linguistic system together. Lexical meanings are only general concepts and names of classes. They reveal almost nothing about reality. In human thought, meaning is processed by difficult sentences and speeches, books, ideologies, and even traditions over a long time. All reasoning is dependent on adding new aspects to objects—be they simple or complex. Therefore, in a thought process, an interpretant has a crucial function. For Peirce, an interpretant produces constantly new meanings. Concepts grow—and this is what culture is all about.<sup>62</sup>

This is also how the construction of New Testament theology can be understood. As the first Christians start to create homologies and credos about Christ's resurrection, for instance, they use both the stories about Easter events in Jerusalem and theological material from the Old Testament. During the process of developing theology, Jesus' death, burial and resurrection are interpreted as a cultic procession where the victim is slaughtered, blood is poured out, and atonement takes place in the Holy of Holies before God (1 Cor. 15:3–5; Rom. 4:25; Hebr. 9:12).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> See Peirce, *CP* 2.274. There is actually also an equivalent for the signifier in Peirce's theory, but that issue is a bit more technical. He calls the signifier a *Replica*. Furthermore, a *lexicon* is a collection of lexical meanings but practical meaning that is produced by the *semiosis* is something else.

<sup>61</sup> Peirce, *CP* 243–249. See also Pharies, *Charles S. Peirce and the Linguistic Sign*, 41–42.

<sup>62</sup> This is not at all the same as the poststructuralist idea according to which lexical meanings constantly change and grow. Peirce's theory, when applied to that discussion, proves that the poststructuralist view has been incorrect in describing thought processes.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Balla who discusses the role of confessions at length in his *Challenges*, 200–209.

In such descriptions the enriching of theological ideas develops into larger doctrines of redemption. The nature of such statements is semiotic in the sense that theological concepts are given particular meaning through Christology, in this case. Several referential aspects remain, though. Firstly, the mundane events maintain their status as the point of departure for the theological thought (such as arrest and crucifixion). Secondly, the new reference created by the *interpretant* that concerns a theological reality, Jesus' death, means a crucial change in a human being's relation to God. An act of atonement can be considered real, and this is significant both to the author who has constructed the credal statement and to those who adopt the belief later.

As far as meaning is considered, this is how the textual meaning of New Testament propositions can be detected. A semiotic analysis reveals the signification process through which the final form of a theological statement is created. Frei was apparently right when assuming that this is a narratological method. Story in itself plays an essential part in this kind of analysis. Semiotics is needed, however, in order to prevent the wrong interpretation of such an analysis as a merely descriptive repetition of the narrative itself. The analysis must go deeper. An investigation of the *semiosis* that produces theological statements is able to select and point out those expressions that are significant for New Testament theology.

Furthermore, at this phase, a final note on the issue of methods needs to be made. Linguistic and literary methods have entered both general New Testament investigation and biblical hermeneutics. As we have argued throughout this study, methods or readings used in comparative literature have also become popular in biblical studies: structuralism, narratology, rhetoric, reader-response criticism and the like. New collections on methodology refer to these approaches and suggest many more.<sup>64</sup>

Jeanrond, for instance, has applied such readings to New Testament hermeneutics. He sees texts as "dynamic communicative units that disclose their semantic potential to the reader only in the act of reading itself." He also speaks of different "genres of reading" that "allow the text to disclose its particular communicative perspective in the act of reading." For Jeanrond, particular textual genres "call for particular reading genres."<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> We have referred to Selden-Widdowson-Brooker, *Literary Theory*, but there are also theological applications. See for instance Green's collection Green (ed.), *Hearing the New Testament*.

<sup>65</sup> Jeanrond, *JR* 76 (1996) 240; cf. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 86–92. Jeanrond in his own approach emphasizes the reader-response aspect, see pp. 110–115.

Historical “readings,” in his opinion, do not make textual readings futile, quite the opposite.

At the beginning of this chapter, we saw how Theissen explored the semiotic dimension of religion but, due to certain philosophical commitments, did not focus entirely on the text. Jeandron goes further as he states that biblical theology “emerges first and foremost in the act of reading as a semantic necessity from within the biblical texts themselves.”<sup>66</sup> Methods that focus on textuality usually believe, as Ricoeur has stated, that meanings are interwoven with the semantic information of propositions. The content of a particular New Testament text is a semantic necessity that scholars always need to take into account.

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<sup>66</sup> Jeandron, *JR* 76 (1996) 241.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE RISE OF CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

The publication of *The Rise of Christian Beliefs: The Thought World of Early Christians* (2010) marked the climax of professor Räisänen's public career. He had actually just retired, and the monograph he had prepared for more than two decades starts with an apology for the delay.<sup>1</sup> As we turn to the analysis of Räisänen's final *tour de force* we need all the results garnered in the preceding chapters. His monograph gathers together most of the themes he has held as essential in biblical studies. In order to understand Räisänen's line of thought in the *Rise* one needs to remember his hermeneutics of the chain of interpretation. This alone is not enough though since Räisänen's focus on contradictory diversity could be explained by his history-of-religions approach. The Bible for Räisänen, as we have claimed, is as full of contradictions and legendary formulations as the Quran was for Reimarus.

Since this "history of early Christian religion," which Räisänen has intended to write from the days of his *Beyond*, is based on Wrede's terminology and aspires to replace traditional New Testament theology, the theoretical problems created by the Wredean tradition follow him into this work. How to abandon New Testament theology without abandoning the treatment of theology? Wrede was consistent in moving to a completely other area but Räisänen, in this description of "Christian beliefs," focuses on "thought world." Can the inherent theoretical contradictions be overcome in the process itself?

Räisänen has intentionally used Berger's sociology of knowledge approach, and some of his conclusions can be understood only through a Weberian background. This cannot explain everything, though. Räisänen's dependence on Bultmann and the demythologizing project must also be borne in mind. All this would be incomplete, however, if one were to miss Räisänen's Remarian intention to attack the early Christian *Systema*, the set of distinct beliefs and doctrines. For Räisänen, the "thought world of early Christians" was filled with problematic views of God and this world.

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<sup>1</sup> "It is with relief that I give this book up for publishing, for I have been working on it far too long." Räisänen, *Rise*, xvii.

Therefore, in this last monograph, he suggests that Christianity cannot be considered a revelation based true religion that really transmits propositional knowledge about God and humanity: in particular a call to repentance, forgiveness and salvation (to which his main chapters refer).

### 8.1. *Choosing between Poststructuralism and Historicism*

Considering the theoretical discussion in the preceding chapters one needs to ask where Räsänen stands in relation to the two very different approaches that affect his thinking: Theissen's semiotic reading and Berger and Luckmann's poststructuralist theory on the one side, and the whole "pre-structuralist" historical-critical tradition promoted by distinguished scholars from Strauss to Bultmann to Funk on the other. What does the Wredean approach mean in practice? Considering Räsänen's *Religionsgeschichte* (the comparative religion), the case is anything but clear. If he is interested in particular texts and the separate early Christian groups behind them, he should then focus mainly on these distinct groups. This, however, is not what he does in his books.

In principle, a history-of-religion approach, as a "history of ideas," should describe the symbolic world created by these alleged early Christian groups. Questioning the boundaries of the canon certainly points in this direction.<sup>2</sup> Räsänen has spared no effort in developing his theory about the sociology of knowledge of early Christianity but what one would really expect to find first is an analysis of such groups and their emergence. If Räsänen has set out to investigate the ways they create their symbolic world, he would need a historical point of departure. Only in this way he could explain the experiences that motivate the appearance of new symbols. This, however, is not what we find in his *Rise*. His monograph may cause a certain frustration in readers as the table of contents still faithfully follows the *loci* of medieval dogmatics.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Räsänen lists his principles also in his *Challenges* and reminds his readers that his work (1) "is not limited to the canon and," (2) "makes no distinction between 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy'." Also other principles are mentioned. Räsänen, *Challenges*, 176.

<sup>3</sup> This has been noted for instance by Moxnes who, commenting on the *Beyond*, already says that a thematic presentation of early Christian thought "falls within a paradigm that is much used in presentations of New Testament theology (the very phenomenon he purports to go 'beyond')." Moxnes, *Moving Beyond*, 264. Räsänen, answering Moxnes in the same collection, admits that neither his brief outlines nor his later work (referring to the *Rise*) reveal any deviations from a thematically arranged "New Testament Theology." He has used "conventional catchwords" but, in the final analysis, he does not use "-logies" in headings. Räsänen, *Moving Beyond*, 438–439. Without any further apologies he admits

There must be some sort of confusion behind this. As Räsänen himself writes, when defining his theory, the idea of a symbolic universe helps one understand the “dialectic between experience and interpretation.” This is another thing that the reader cannot find in his work. What Räsänen actually does here is an analysis of a dialectic between tradition and reinterpretation. In the end, experience has little room in this process. He may of course consider it a factor that motivates reinterpretations, but in practice he just keeps explaining events that can be identified as new *Sitz-im-Leben* situations in the life of the Christian community. This is only to be expected since we learned earlier in 2.5. that Räsänen explains experience in fact through historical events and especially crises.<sup>4</sup>

One of Räsänen's primary principles states that one must abandon the idea of a fixed canon and investigate the whole phenomenon of early “Christian” thought. But one is left with the question, why does Räsänen abandon his premises? He constantly focuses on biblical traditions. How does his approach differ from Bultmannian redaction criticism? Bultmann claimed that theology changed in new contexts and completely new and even unfamiliar elements (from mystery religions etc.) were introduced to Christian theology in the course of history. New stages of interpretation in Räsänen's theory are identical with new redactional stages whose theology can be found in the canonical writings themselves or may be detected later in other writings. It seems that Räsänen has not left the canonical context in the sense he probably had intended.<sup>5</sup>

The main difference between Räsänen and Berger is probably in the former's conviction that the sociology of knowledge must be applied especially to theological language. Räsänen admits, of course, that mythical language in any culture belongs to the same category—but this does not make him a phenomenologist. The meanings in language in general, for Räsänen, are not subjective. The phenomenological reduction that is necessary for the theory itself concerns just religious language. In phenomenology things are different: it concerns all language and all knowledge. This theory says that we know this world in terms of how we experience it.

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that his approach “stands in continuity with the tradition of New Testament Theologies.” The reason for this can be found already in the *Beyond*, where he states that “ideas and mental conceptions” are essential in the assessment of religion—this referring naturally to the idea of the symbolic world.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth reminding readers that this in particular was the difference between Räsänen and Berger in their explanation concerning the dynamics of the symbolic world. See 5.4. above.

<sup>5</sup> See the treatment of Bultmann's theories in 2.2. and 3.1.; cf. the description of the sociological features in Zimmermann, *Neutestamentliche Methodenlehre*, 172–175.



In phenomenology, knowledge itself is reduced to statements that are mental. Our view of reality, the theory says, is based on personal experience. One must remember that Husserl, the father of the theory, even stated that Copernicus was wrong: according to experience, the sun revolves around the globe. This offers us a new picture: since the historical-critical school often states that its reading represents a Copernican revolution in biblical criticism, a phenomenological sociology of knowledge would in that case mean a counter-revolution, interpreting things once more the other way round. Perhaps this humorous little picture can awaken us to how essential the epistemological difference actually is.<sup>6</sup> One should remember that Berger, writing with Luckmann, called his book "The Social Construction of Reality." For phenomenology, there is no other reality than the one that is mentally constructed in society.

Räisänen does not think that scientific language is bound by a phenomenological reduction. Instead, he is convinced that science has perfect objective knowledge about this world and even history.<sup>7</sup> Several examples in the analysis above have proven this. This is why he is able, for instance, to make a distinction between different redactional layers in the first place. The idea of a symbolic world, for him, is mainly a tool allowing for a sociological interpretation of religious ideas, meaning doctrines. One must not be too hard on Räisänen, though. Apparently Berger and Luckmann also adopted a similar dichotomy, as have many other scholars in the field of sociology. We have earlier discussed certain features of sociological structuralism where positivist epistemology is united with a poststructuralist view of language. Scholars have not considered it erroneous to say that the structures of language reflect the structures of reality even though they have maintained that language cannot refer outside its own system.<sup>8</sup>

This is how we finally arrive at Räisänen's table of contents in the work. His analysis is more conservative (in the historical-critical sense) than his theory. He starts with eschatology in the first chapter of Part II. Then he moves on to the issue of life after death. His outline closely resembles that of the Catholic Frank Matera in his *New Testament Theology*, who

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<sup>6</sup> Mind my light expression here, but Räisänen himself has compared the appearance of the historical-critical investigation to the Copernican turn in world view, Räisänen, *Raamattutieto*, 178. For Husserl's views I have used Himanka, *Se ei sittenkään pyöri*.

<sup>7</sup> One may of course suspect that Berger at least in some cases makes the same mistake. As we have seen, he does for instance follow the old history-of-religion school definition of mystery religions.

<sup>8</sup> The problems of sociological structuralism were discussed above, see 5.5.

intentionally follows traditional doctrinal formulations. Furthermore, Räisänen's view is close to standard Lutheran *ordo salutis* in dogmatics: the state of humanity and the problem of sin, not to mention the question "What Must I Do to Be Saved?" in chapter seven. Gradually, one begins to wonder what the special contribution the suggested history-of-religion approach offers here. The chapters consistently follow traditional dogmas: sin, soteriology, Christology, pneumatology, Israel, and idolatry. These subjects are not gleaned from a detailed analysis of early "Christian" groups or Jewish sects that construct their symbolic world by creating distinct symbols. They could have been taken from the Lutheran Catechism.<sup>9</sup>

There is a tension in the book itself, and Räisänen appears to ignore it. In his introduction he states, as we have noted above, that his analysis will not focus on doctrines.

*It does not focus on "doctrines" (though the development that led to the fixation of Christian doctrines mostly after the period in question, is not without interest), but on the formation of beliefs in interaction with the experience of individuals and communities. The term Rise in my title indicates that this is understood as a living, dynamic process. This process can be described as reinterpretation of traditions in new situations in light of new insights and experiences.*<sup>10</sup>

Such an approach can be problematic in terms of consistency. One can state that Räisänen has left his history-of-religion particularism and forced his material into an existing pattern. He does not let the alleged religious groups speak in their own voice, and he does not even investigate individual beliefs. Instead, he assumes that the texts that really should be different—if the theory is right—now against all expectations appear speak about one and the same issue, be it soteriology or Christology. He also defines one of the views as normative—for reasons often unknown to the reader—and then compares it with other views. Thus he postulates a "true" and original diversity that is an ideal state of affairs in the real

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Matera, *Theology*, viii–x. Houlden in his revision notes that Räisänen focuses on beliefs "rather than events or institutions." This is why he also calls the work "an exposition of NT theology from a neutral rather than a committed standpoint." This is precisely what Räisänen does not want his work to be. Houlden, *Conversations in Religion and Theology* 8 (2010) 103–106.

<sup>10</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 5; italics his. In the same context Räisänen states that his work "concentrates on great lines and main problems and opts for a thematic organization." This, however, is precisely what the reader cannot find in the disposition of his book. Räisänen's themes are simply traditional doctrines, the *loci*.

world of the writers of the New Testament. Once again, a procedure like this sounds like the epistemology of positivistic historicism.

Furthermore, it is not clear what Räisänen means by “doctrine.” He often states that in principle they do not exist. Doctrines cannot be stable entities. He does not believe in structures that endure through the flow of history. The issue of assuming that an ancient author has believed that his or her conviction is a doctrine differs from a scholar assuming that a doctrine or its contents really exists—and to take it into account in investigation. In Räisänen’s theory everything changes and this is what his theory is all about. He has set out to describe the spectrum of ideas that never create a doctrine. For Räisänen, the Aristotelian categorization of concepts, in theology, thus becomes a poststructuralist *Logos*: and illusory category that is merely a cultural fact. Räisänen assumes that it is a “symbol” in the symbolic world. Doctrine, thus, is considered a cultural construction that has no transcendental value. This, once again, is approximately what Bultmann stated about doctrines: as the meaning of religious experience is expressed in terms of human language it is directed by contemporary concepts and usually takes the form of a myth.<sup>11</sup>

Räisänen’s view here is even close to that of nominalism. He holds that only quite subjective beliefs are real. Collective symbols that form the symbolic universe have a longer life but even they, according to the theory, change easily and hastily in the violent cultural evolution of early “theology.” Räisänen remains ambivalent here, though. He simultaneously postulates the existence of petrified symbols that start to obstruct the chain of interpretation and prevent the process of the chain from working in a normal way. In order to work, his hermeneutical theory must depend on two contradictory premises.<sup>12</sup>

This is no minor problem. If “doctrine” as a concept does not correspond to any real object in the “real world,” or any factual category that can be detected and discussed, it should be deconstructed. Moreover, scholars who believe this should no longer use such terms. Räisänen should not speak for instance about Christology because “Christology” for him is not a general concept and does not actually refer to any object in the life of

<sup>11</sup> See subchapter 3.4.

<sup>12</sup> This probably does not create problems for Räisänen himself. As he tends to treat theological issues in terms of historicism, he can just assume that “conservatism” steps in. Some groups attempt to preserve their convictions just as others wish to renew views. This may explain why “fundamentalism” is one of Räisänen’s primary targets. He cannot treat some views merely as time bound symbols, but he evaluates innovative and fundamentalist views.

the Church. He might speak of “Christologies,” but even here he would drift into trouble because different Christologies have little in common. To make it simple: since Räsänen focuses on diversity and makes it an ontological feature directing epistemology, he is not allowed to use general concepts that contradict the idea of diversity. Instead, he should hold fast to his theory and investigate particular beliefs in particular textual contexts—without falling into generalization and categorization. This, of course, is difficult and perhaps too much to ask of any scholar.<sup>13</sup>

We can admit to understanding the difficulties Räsänen confronts here. In his analysis he states that doctrines are fictional constructions. As his theory of sociology of knowledge implies, they are descriptions in and representatives of the symbolic world. Doctrines are, as he earlier labelled the creeds, poetry. When he addresses the conceptual world of poetics, Räsänen apparently confuses general linguistic concepts and dogmatic doctrines. Even though sin, Christology, and eschatology are dogmatic categories, *loci*, he starts to treat them as linguistic symbols. This is how they, in Räsänen’s theory, still have universal meaning.<sup>14</sup>

Why has Räsänen created his table of contents and the outline of his investigation according to doctrines then? Is he destined to show that there never were these kinds of doctrines that would have continuing value? Some premises in his earlier works push the conclusions in this direction. We shall return to this question later. Such an approach would be problematic in many senses, especially considering Räsänen’s own ambition in his sociology of knowledge. An investigation like that would not represent history of religion but critique of religion instead. It would rather be part of philosophy of religion. What Räsänen could have done is a history of ideas of different early Christian groups, as we noted in the beginning. This could have been possible only if he could have identified such groups. This is not the place to speculate whether that would have been possible. As this has not happened, Räsänen stays with the canonical Bible, especially New Testament. Even though he denies the primacy of the canon, he still keeps investigating canonical passages. He has questioned the possibility of a

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<sup>13</sup> See Räsänen, *Rise*, 213–221.

<sup>14</sup> There is an interesting theoretical problem here. When Räsänen implies that “doctrines” are a reality and that they are fictional reality, he in fact reiterates what Theissen said about them. They are literary constructs and this is also the reason why they live in a culture or a religion. In this respect, Räsänen’s theory is consistent only if one assumes that he has a linguistic or even a semiotic basis to his theory. But what should one then think about the fact that this precisely is what Räsänen criticized in Theissen’s theory?

unified, early post-Easter Christian Church and called it a mere construction. For some reason, however, that is what he investigates in his work.

The essential problem behind these solutions is quite clear. The basic source for any scholar is the canon and, apart from that, they have almost nothing whatsoever that would be directly linked with biblical material and to which they could refer, with the exception of the Gospel of Thomas perhaps. And this canon has been preserved by the church, the current that finally won the battle for Christian teaching. Therefore, to argue for another kind of reality, a historical reality expressing multiple diversity behind this canon, means to reconstruct a kind of “deep structure” in these theological texts. This must be done on the basis of the canonical writings. There is a problem. This is what tradition criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism have done for decades. What is new in stating that this well-known work should now be interpreted in terms of sociology of knowledge? I am afraid these kinds of questions will remain unanswered.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, in Räisänen's hermeneutical model the alleged “chain” is not perfect. In fact, according to his definitions the links, a.k.a. particular theological views, are not linked together like in a chain. Instead, they are loose and isolated and, as Räisänen says, often in a strict opposition to one another. Another metaphor might more accurately express. Perhaps an Old Testament based “octopus-model” might serve better, where different currents could be seen as separate tentacles. The only problem here is that the New Testament and its canonical theology would and should be understood as an independent tentacle, which is not directly connected with Jewish apocalyptic or later post-Christian gnosticism. Räisänen probably could not accept this kind of model because it would weaken his idea of religious diversity inside the canonical tradition.

Diversity is what Räisänen investigates in his *Rise*. His Wredean program attempts to detect and sort out the basic multiplicity, the “panorama” of early Christian thought. This was also the project he started in

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<sup>15</sup> In this respect I suppose that Räisänen has over-emphasized the idea that a history-of-religion approach could really work with an alleged vast group of texts where the canonical texts are merely a small section. There are no relevant texts available and, in practice, Räisänen himself does not make good use of extra-canonical writings. When he does, he constantly has to admit that these writings are either too far from Christian writings or too late to be relevant for the interpretation of canonical texts. What is easier to argue is the history of influence that could also be called a chain of interpretation—at least as far as post-biblical writings are considered. This, however, is not news and cannot be a basis for a completely new approach on New Testament theology.

the *Beyond*. Räsänen is not much interested in describing apparent theological “chains” that are coherent in the New Testament tradition—and for some reason resemble standard interpretations of Christian theology. Instead, in each chapter of his *Rise*, Räsänen tries to pick up every possible deviation from the “orthodox” view in order to argue for the tapestry of human imagination he has postulated. This hermeneutical program is under investigation in the following subchapters.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, even though the theory that Räsänen follows bears the marks of a poststructuralist system, he seldom adopts poststructuralist epistemology in his works. Instead, the principles of historicism repeatedly occur in his inferences. This analysis has shown that his basic theory about the emergence of symbols closely resembles Bultmannian form criticism where different layers of tradition are detected. Räsänen does not really speak of new symbols but of new interpretations. These interpretations are links in a chain, redactional layers where traditional symbols are invested with new meanings. One is entitled to conclude that the standard historical-critical view prevails in Räsänen’s sociology of knowledge.

Even though Räsänen has borrowed the main title of his theory from Wrede, he never accepts the Wredean claim that theology and the treatment of religious thought should be excluded from a true history of religion. Instead, Räsänen chooses theology and adapts a Gablerian historical theology to a new sociological setting.<sup>17</sup> This creates a tension, though, because Weberian sociology of religion—which is also involved—unmistakably aims at the interpretation of religion, not theology. The setting is confused because Räsänen himself departs from Berger’s Weberian theory and focuses on tradition, not experience. In Räsänen’s theory the order of elements differs from that of Berger: tradition–experience–interpretation.

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<sup>16</sup> Even in this issue Räsänen builds on a Bultmannian tradition. Käsemann, when postulating theological diversity in his essays, states that an analysis must assume that the original diversity has been greater than the one we find in the extant New Testament texts. “This in turn means, however, that only fragments of the discussion within primitive Christianity have been preserved for us and that the variability of the primitive Christian kerygma must have been very much greater than a consideration of the state of affairs as revealed in the canon would lead us to suppose.” Käsemann, *Essays*, 100. “Original” diversity, according to the Bultmannian school, is a postulated diversity that must be assumed in order to understand the multiplicity of early Christian teaching.

<sup>17</sup> This, in turn, is not a new solution. Instead, it is quite identical with what German historicists like Troeltsch have done when separating historical investigation from theological speculation (or the study of the historical Jesus from the interpretation of the ecclesial kerygma concerning the Christ of faith). In Bultmann’s version the demythologized history was separated from existentialist kerygmatic theology. See 3.4. above.

Religion and even the symbolic world imply the need for a reinterpretation of early Christian tradition. As we saw, this is not far from Bultmann's redaction criticism where the moulding of tradition is seen as a process of reinterpretation in new contexts (*Sitz im Leben*).<sup>18</sup>

This is how Räisänen ends up with a "history of theological interpretation," as one could call it. It bears the marks of a sociology of religion but it is evident that Räisänen has reinterpreted the concept of religion. Religion is not a free field of divine experience but, rather, a play that is dependent on history-of-influence. This creates a paradox: the fact of diversity must be based on a flow of tradition. Other scholars have seen it the other way around. The alleged lack of unity is the result of the diverse nature of the religion itself. Separate groups created and developed their views apart from tradition and even against tradition. For Räisänen, tradition always has a primary status.<sup>19</sup>

The influence of Weberian sociology of religion in Räisänen's hermeneutics is evident also because, for him, religion is culture and culture is religion. For Räisänen, new interpretations of Christian tradition are merely signs of cultural evolution. In this hermeneutical setting no individual view of "doctrine" can be absolutized or given priority at the cost of other beliefs. This is why Räisänen, in his *Rise*, attempts to trace the emergence of the different traits of such Christian culture, the symbolic world, or a conceptual system.

## 8.2. *The Rise and Decline of Eschatology*

As we proceed with the detailed analysis of Räisänen's work, some preliminary remarks are necessary. The outline of his book follows doctrinal classification, as noted. Räisänen starts with eschatology. This is in line with the priorities he has previously given to theological themes in his earlier writings. There is close parallel between this chapter and chapter 5 above. The theological issues Räisänen has chosen to deal with in his *Rise*

<sup>18</sup> Bultmann also assumed that, for instance, the creation of new Jesus-words or the alteration of traditional *ipsissima verba* took place in conflict situations. See Bultmann, *Geschichte*, 4–11. As Räisänen here speaks about crises, he did not need to change the picture essentially.

<sup>19</sup> Dunn notes Räisänen's intention to read the history of early Christianity merely from the perspective of contradiction: "Because one image or model is used on one occasion, does that imply that other images and models have been rejected? Silences may indicate other emphases being taken for granted rather than rejected." Dunn, *RBL* 1 (2011).



correspond to the negations he has made previously during his career. These issues comprise eschatology, sin, judgment, Christology, and creeds. As we saw in the analyses that dealt with Räisänen's rejection of Christian dogmas, the disillusionment surrounding Jesus' second coming belongs at his top priorities. This is also how his thematic analysis in the present work begins: "Last Things First."

Räisänen is well aware of the fact that this is not an easy solution especially for standard historical-critical gospel criticism. Should one assume that eschatology is a true feature in the teaching of the Jesus of history? Many scholars, and probably even Räisänen himself earlier, have chosen another alternative.

The "Jesus quest" is split: an eschatological figure and a noneschatological ("sapiential") figure are in hard competition with each other. The former proclaimed God's kingdom as the imminent great turn of history. The latter taught only "subversive wisdom," criticizing the values of this world with witty aphorisms and parables, urging people to live under God's rule in the here and now.<sup>20</sup>

Had Räisänen chosen to follow standard redaction criticism focusing on the theories about the Q-source, he might have accepted the leading interpretation and supported the sapiential interpretation. That would no doubt have been a safer way for him to proceed considering his background. In the context of a strict dichotomy between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, Jesus' earthly message is usually explained without a strong eschatology since that leaves too much room for high Christology.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, Räisänen chooses Sanders. Following the aims of the "third quest" he does not want to overlook the critical questions Sanders has posed. What can explain Jesus' trial and death sentence? The eschatological explanation seems best. Räisänen remarks, for instance, that the "eschatological interpretation received strong support from the fact that Jesus died on a Roman cross." He had been arrested "by Jewish authorities" and then executed by the Romans as "the king of the Jews." Mere preaching of love, or pragmatic wisdom, as Räisänen says, could bring such a death upon him. Therefore, according to Räisänen, Jesus must have

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<sup>20</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> One is probably entitled to remark that the eschatological interpretation is crucial for Räisänen. Had he not chosen it, his whole theory about the delay of the parousia and Jesus making a cosmic mistake would be futile. This is not to say that Räisänen's theoretical choice would be problematic, quite the contrary. In my estimation he has solid grounds for his solution and also good support for it in the "third quest."

proclaimed "God's kingdom as an imminent reversal."<sup>22</sup> Even though certain passages in the gospels, particularly in Q, may point to a this-worldly interpretation, others support the eschatological alternative. This is why the conclusion is clear: "To understand the rise and early development of Christianity one cannot just dispense with an eschatological Jesus."<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note that, by making this choice, Räisänen too leaves room for messianological interpretations. Therefore, already in the beginning of the analysis, one must ask whether he will be able to remain consistent in his reconstruction. Firstly, how should other features of Jesus' teaching be integrated with this main idea? And secondly, against Reimarus and Bultmann, are there other positive points of contact between Jesus' message and post-Easter messianology? For Räisänen, these questions are not very important. This is due to the fact that, after Easter, nothing happened. Jesus never returned, so theology in general and eschatology in particular had to conform to the new situation.

The main purpose of the Wredean approach, however, is to describe the diversity of early beliefs in the eschatological future. Räisänen's first theme does not provide much material for this, though. He does state that, also in the context of his eschatological interpretation, a scholar "is still faced with the problem of conflicting elements: some signs point in the direction of an *earthly* expectation, while other suggest fulfillment in the *beyond*." His examples here are not convincing however, since he merely makes a distinction between stories that appear to describe quite normal human behavior (like the banquet) and stories that clearly describe heavenly matters. Even Räisänen himself cannot draw important conclusions about this: Jesus' thought world "may have contained elements of both earthly and transcendent eschatology."<sup>24</sup> Since Paul writes along similar lines, there is not much to say about any devastating diversity. Räisänen does mention the spiritualized eschatology that Paul fought in Corinth, but even this is just an anomaly in the tradition: "Yet a spiritualized eschatology predates the problem of delay."<sup>25</sup>

Finally, there are certain passages or at least groups that "directly compete" with one another. Räisänen mentions Second Peter where one can

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<sup>22</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 87. Räisänen's close relation to Sanders is evident in many ways. He refers to Sanders in the footnotes (especially p. 341 footnote 56) and he also gives him special credit in the preface. Cf. Sanders, *Jesus*, 319, 330.

<sup>23</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 89.

<sup>24</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 92; italics his.

<sup>25</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 101, 105.

see a disagreement between two groups about whether a great change in history will come or not. Furthermore, in *The Gospel of Thomas* and in writings with gnostic inclinations, visible fulfillment is polemically denied. And later Origen, naturally, “plays down all material expectation” in order to put forward “the idea of *apokatastasis*, the restoration of all.”<sup>26</sup> It is not clear, however, that these examples yet prove the case that Wrede was purporting.

Based on this kind of evidence one is inclined to assume that Räisänen is mainly interested in the normative treatment of this subject. The problem of delay is essential for him. This is how the treatment of the issue is taken to the level of philosophy of religion. Räisänen detects problems both in New Testament texts and in later history.

Obviously, then, the nonoccurrence of the parousia did cause problems.<sup>27</sup> That Jesus was mistaken in his crucial expectation is only the beginning of the troubles.<sup>28</sup>

According to Räisänen, the church needed to adjust its proclamation and theological view in light of the new situation. “It would be exaggerated to speak of a profound crisis, but undeniably a thoroughgoing (if tacit) process of reinterpretation did take place.” Some spiritualizers “dropped concrete expectation” altogether. The main line of interpretation, however, spoke about the “time of the church.” Here the life of the church was explained as “existence under Christ’s invisible rule.” From this point onwards Räisänen proceeds to Augustine and the Anabaptists, and then all the way to National Socialism and Communism.<sup>29</sup>

The expectation of a concrete great turn of history has helped people maintain their hope in difficult times. For countless Christians down to the present, it has invested history with meaning and hope. But it has also been dangerous because of the innate power of end-time beliefs “to foster self-righteousness among the elect and at times violent opposition to, even persecution of, those identified as belonging to Satan’s party. Apocalypticism has been the source of hope and courage for the oppressed, and—not *too* paradoxically—intransigence and savagery on the part of some oppressors.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 110.

<sup>27</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 110.

<sup>28</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 112.

<sup>29</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 111.

<sup>30</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 111. His quotation is taken from *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* by Collins, McGinn, and Stein, “General Introduction”, x.

In a chain of interpretations there can be false links and probably even some dead ends. Since, for Räsänen, there is no revelatory eschatology, all one has is constructive or destructive reinterpretations. Theologians claiming the truthfulness of certain beliefs are in danger of falling into violent behavioral patterns. It does not necessarily mean persecution as such, but it generates oppression and spiritual violence. This is one of the reasons why eschatology in particular needs to be dissolved in Christian theology. The argumentation is not very Wredean here. The New Testament material is not extremely diverse on these issues. For Räsänen, the main problem is in history. Jesus never came back. Christianity as it stands is not a revelatory religion that has authoritative Scriptures justifying its doctrines.

This is also why Räsänen turns his analysis into a critique of the whole of Western cultural history. This is not merely a substitution for a New Testament theology. Later interpretations in the so-called Christian history can be quite destructive at times. Räsänen even puts Hitler on the stand and accuses Christian dogmatics of the horrors that have taken place in Europe. By quoting Frederic Baumgartner he states: “‘Hitler did not reject Christianity entirely, but he worshipped the avenging God of the apocalyptic books, which are often overlooked as sources for the Nazi cult of the glorification of war.’ Millenarian hope has been a truly mixed blessing in Western history.”<sup>31</sup> Such eschatology led to the Holocaust, as also Räsänen notes, and in this respect the conclusion is clear: such terror has Christian roots. Christian eschatology in the form of apocalypticism is guilty of producing a “glorification of war.” Räsänen thus presents and outright claims that had there not been Christian eschatology in the New Testament—or had it been at least rejected by rationalist humanism—Europe would have been saved from violent dictators like Hitler.

All this is just a series of incidental examples though. Räsänen’s ideological point is elsewhere. The treatment of eschatology is just one subject that shows what religion is really about. Every Christian lives in some kind of religious or ideological tradition. People share similar symbols that represent experiences of this world. Therefore Räsänen states that these ideas can be used for good or for bad. However, they never say anything real about a divine Being behind religion or history. According to Räsänen, theology, or a history of religion in this case, is not about God. Instead, it can prove fatal to a traditional belief in the God of the Bible:

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<sup>31</sup> Räsänen, *Rise*, 112. For the quotation, see Baumgartner, *Longing for the End*, 211.

“After Auschwitz, at the latest, it has become difficult to believe in a God of history.”<sup>32</sup> For Räisänen, there is no God who could return and compensate humanity for all the transgressions or punish the sins committed in history.

As far as eschatology is concerned Räisänen, in his analysis, does not provide a spectrum of views proving the essential diversity in the thought world of early congregations. There are certain anomalies, but Räisänen does not identify them with any high profile groups or great names in the early Church. Instead, he focuses on the delay of the parousia. His reasoning is mainly one of philosophy of religion. He is interested in showing how the disillusionment in eschatology changed Christian thinking and provided new conceptions in Christian ideology—not to mention Western culture and politics. In this respect Räisänen’s first analytical chapter is perplexing. It appears to be more directed by his ideological writings treated in the previous chapters of the present investigation than by his sociology of knowledge theory, or history of religion. He focuses on a normative treatment of what he calls the “nonoccurrence of the parousia.” Since Jesus was mistaken in his main eschatological idea, in his own message that is, the whole system must be wrong. This justifies his solution for an outline: “Last things first.” Furthermore, this approaches what Reimarus stated in his early work. Jesus’ main program was destroyed and, therefore, the apostles had to create a new religion in its stead. And this is also what Räisänen states in the chapter on eschatology in his *Rise*.

### 8.3. *On the Human Condition*

As Räisänen goes on to treat particular theological issues in his monograph, difficulties concerning consistency recur. Räisänen’s examples dealing with the diversity of different views do not appear to be as convincing as he himself probably assumes. This creates problems for his argumentation. The basic point of departure, in the 1970s context at least, is quite understandable. As a younger scholar Räisänen wrote in a tradition where the historical Jesus had vanished from the picture, some scholars had raised doubts about the “dogmatic” Paul, and the “kerygma” of the early church no longer had any particular content. Käsemann, in his provocative articles, questioned the unity of New Testament theology—as

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<sup>32</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 112.

well as the confession of the Christian religion as such. Considering that these were the issues of the time, it is only natural that Räisänen too casts doubts over the theological unity of the entire New Testament.<sup>33</sup>

It is not easy, however, to move from Käsemann's rather short list of inconsistencies to the claim that every dogmatic category in every New Testament writing is filled with contradictions. Käsemann expounded on the alleged plurality of the early Christian kerygma, certain problems with (reconstructed) early Christology, the problem concerning Paul and James, together with some other minor exegetical issues. These were details in the scholarly discussion. Still, according to most scholars, the basic unity of New Testament soteriology overwhelmed the reconstructed contradictions Käsemann presented: Jesus' sacrificial death, redemption and forgiveness of sins, resurrection Christology, faith in the exalted Lord and Messiah and so on. This creates problems for Räisänen's approach. In order to reveal the essential heterogeneity of early theology and the fragmentary nature of theological presentations he is compelled to exaggerate both the amount and depth of the variety of ideas. Many of the issues he takes under consideration remain speculative and his conclusions do not appear to justify the devastating picture of biblical theology he has drawn in the *Rise*.

When Räisänen discusses divine judgment, hell and resurrection, the picture is quite the opposite what one might expect based on his premises. Views on the resurrection, for instance, are not that complex. Räisänen does elaborate on the Corinthian situation and the problem of spiritual resurrection, but one is left with the impression that there should be more than this. Does Räisänen really mean that every disagreement over theology and every controversy proves his case? He is in danger of contrasting his analysis with an implied ideal situation according to which there should be no controversies in theology and culture in the first place. And *vice versa* if people disagree, there can be no truth. The problem with this view is that no scientific theory of history recognizes this kind of reality. It sounds instead like the Augustinian principle Reimarus used.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Käsemann's list was treated in 2.3. above.

<sup>34</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 126–127. There is a vicious circle here that is quite similar to the one concerning the “inerrancy” debate over the gospel material. As we have seen, in the early phase of the historical investigation of the Bible an acceptable “true” revelatory tradition was expected to be a polished compilation of perfect historical and dogmatic clauses. That kind of historical reality cannot be found anywhere. Therefore Räisänen still uses Reimarus' inerrancy-principle, even though he no longer does it consciously.

Furthermore, Räisänen's arguments are often somewhat extraordinary. His examples of the alleged contradictions appear to be forced. In his treatment of the resurrection theme he writes:

In short, the notions of resurrection and immortality are conceptually different, having their logical places in different eschatologies. The resurrection logically belongs to the collective hope for an earthly kingdom, the survival of souls to the expectation of a direct transfer of individuals to heaven. The natural location for resurrected bodies is a space-time world.<sup>35</sup>

This kind of medicalist argument has seldom been presented in biblical studies. Räisänen himself knows that few scholars accept his dichotomy and admits that concerning the idea of the renewed earth being the place of resurrected life, "at this point Paul is, at best, quite vague."<sup>36</sup> Apart from this, resurrection theology in the New Testament is quite uniform and coherent. So, why select a few particular peculiarities in some vague passages and build an explanation on them? Why not pay also attention to the prevailing symbolic world that most groups shared? I do not mean this as an apology but only as a question that should arise from Räisänen's own hermeneutical theory. If he is interested in a particular symbolic world he should not have personal preferences in constructing it. This problem makes one suspect that there may be a bias behind Räisänen's interpretations. He is not interested merely in sorting out the real genesis of a resurrection theology, namely the symbols that create the symbolic world of the first Christians and gradually become the elements of the church's confession. Instead, he appears to avoid issues that falsify his general hermeneutical claim. This is probably the reason why he summarizes the results concerning the resurrection as follows:

In summary, the idea that the actual flesh should survive the grave was new in the empire and, to many, abhorrent. Christians in Corinth in the mid-50s, Christians of the Thomas tradition, and many others both within and without the orthodox church during many centuries denied it. They were only interpreting "resurrection" in categories that their own culture had developed.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, Räisänen has collected a group of anomalies. It is quite obvious that his reasoning is not grounded on a thorough analysis of the diversity he has found in early Christian congregations that, according to

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<sup>35</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 132.

<sup>36</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 132.

<sup>37</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 131.



the analysis, had thought and taught differently on the resurrection. All he has noted is that some individuals in certain communities had disagreed with the apostolic teaching. Other examples are extra-canonical and their use in the original question about diversity would lead to anachronisms. In the New Testament itself, thus, one cannot find an essential discrepancy between convictions, or significant diversity in these particular issues. This must be noted completely apart from any verdict about whether Räisänen might be right in his primary aim or not. This is a matter of justification and falsification. The diversity thesis simply lacks proof.<sup>38</sup>

A bold Wredean program cannot rest on cases like this. This is not diversity proven by essential contradictions and mutually exclusive views. Räisänen is destined to drift into situation where he, in his history of ideas, writes a dictionary of early Mediterranean religiosity. Any religious thought that cannot fit the orthodox reconstruction Räisänen himself has defined, will be given an entry of its own in the collection—no matter how influential or widely accepted it has been. The canon, of course, has no relevance here since Räisänen investigates the phenomenon of religion. It is apparent that his premises start to create problems for his history-of-religion project.

Problems are evident also in Räisänen's views about sin and the human condition. One can admit that he is right to take up examples of sapiential Jewish teaching about personal struggle against sin first: in those texts sin is not always seen as power that is able to take every human being to eternal punishment.<sup>39</sup> But when he moves on to gospel material written two hundred years later, the picture is darker. Räisänen has to admit that here the implications of sin are more difficult—even though he claims that the picture of Jesus as a "great friend of sinners" is largely due to Luke's literary activity.<sup>40</sup>

The well-known difference between Second Temple Jewish synergism and Pauline *nomos*-theology is not a sign of Christian diversity, though. From the days of Martin Hengel's *Judentum und Hellenismus* the study

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<sup>38</sup> Räisänen of course himself states that investigation must not be limited to the canon alone. After adopting such a premise he must admit, however, that the more general diversity is not a diversity of the canonical tradition. A rejected principle must not be brought back into the discussion later. He does not speak about the diversity of canonical or confessional Christianity but the diversity of the whole Jewish-Christian-gnostic religious phenomenon.

<sup>39</sup> This has been common knowledge in scholarship, see Hengel's investigation *Judaism and Hellenism*, see for instance Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus*, 275–318.

<sup>40</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 141.

of Jewish theology has been well aware of the diverse descriptions of the meaning and significance of Torah in the lives of different Jewish groups—not to mention Qumran.<sup>41</sup> Jewish nomism no doubt differs from the conceptions of the law in the New Testament, and especially from Paul's theology. It is not logical, however, to claim that the teachings of Hasmonean wisdom-schools should be treated as Christian ideas that need to be taken at face value in a project called *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*. Räisänen constantly drifts into trouble and contradictions in issues concerning the structure of his theory. As he investigates early "Christian" religion and abandons the idea of a canon, it becomes almost impossible to decide what can be accepted as Christian. This is probably the reason why Räisänen, in case after case and against his primary aims, ends up focusing on canonical diversity.

Where does diversity, then, become apparent? Räisänen's explanation is based on his own disputed theory about Paul's view of sin. He starts with the notion that, for Paul, sin is an enslaving power that holds humankind in its grip until the last judgment. Here the anthropological view is quite harsh.

"Flesh" is thus something in humans that causes them to be under the power of Sin. This may be seen as a radicalization of the Jewish notion of the evil inclination, or evil heart, as the source of sin. Yet on the other hand it is difficult not to see in this dark picture of the "flesh" some influence from the depreciation of the body in Hellenistic popular philosophy that, continuing the legacy of Platonic dualism, largely regarded human involvement with matter as a misfortune, sometimes of cosmic dimensions.<sup>42</sup>

Räisänen's justification of diversity here rests on the claim that merciful Jewish synergism turns suddenly into black-and-white Hellenistic nomism. For Räisänen, Paul's view cannot derive from Old Testament texts or any kind of Jewish thinking—despite all the descriptions of the Fall and its consequences, not to mention the devastating sinfulness that drove Israel and Judah to exile. Instead, Räisänen presents a renewed version of Bultmann's dualism. Paul's negative anthropology, for Räisänen, may not be a directly gnostic view because to maintain this would rely once more on a difficult anachronism, but it derives from Hellenistic popular philosophy with a similar view of the human condition. The free human spirit has been captured in the carnal body, the flesh. Redemption from this kind of

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<sup>41</sup> See for instance Hengel, *Judentum und Hellenismus*, 453–463.

<sup>42</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 144.

prison can only be attained through a spiritual resurrection. Therefore, in Räisänen's estimation, Bultmann was wrong, but only in part. Paul's view does not depend on religion but philosophy. Nevertheless, it is Hellenistic, continuing "the legacy of Platonic dualism."<sup>43</sup>

The first problem with such a view is evident. Paul's anthropology is not dualistic. Even Räisänen does not assume that Paul would teach spiritual resurrection. Paul presents extensive explanations of creation theology. He also binds his strong conviction concerning bodily resurrection with the very idea that God creates both earthly bodies and heavenly bodies (1 Cor. 15). Furthermore, Paul teaches transformation. He believes that those who still are alive when the Lord returns will be transformed: God saves also the body, not just the spirit (1 Cor. 15:52).

Nevertheless, Räisänen sticks to his dualistic view. He does admit that this kind of view has no support in other parts of the Bible, though. This is why he claims it is Paul's special view that has grown out of Paul's personal psycho-pathology, Hellenistic philosophy being merely a secondary justification for the inner conviction.

It is hard to avoid the impression that Paul is forced to create a bleak picture of the world in bondage to Sin for the reason that otherwise God's radical act in delivering Christ to death would seem futile.<sup>44</sup>

Repeating here the argument suggested by Ed Sanders, and developed by Räisänen himself in his *Paul and the Law*, he states that Paul "thinks backwards." Räisänen can no longer find "inductive" reasoning in Paul's view of the human condition. Against his tradition—as Räisänen believes—Paul invents new ideas that contradict both Jewish and early Christian teaching.<sup>45</sup>

That Paul reasons "from the solution to the plight," not the other way round, has been strongly emphasized by E.P. Sanders, but the point was made long ago, for example by Paul Wernle: "St. Paul's pessimism is intended to serve his apologetic. It is because Jesus alone is the Redeemer, that the world has

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<sup>43</sup> Räisänen is ambivalent here, though. As the quotation shows, he does admit that Paul's view "may be seen as a radicalization of the Jewish notion of the evil inclination." But he prefers the Hellenist version. Furthermore, the shortened Finnish translation of the *Rise* provides even a clearer definition: "the spirit was imprisoned in matter." Räisänen, *Mitä varhaiset kristityt uskoivat*, 127.

<sup>44</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 148.

<sup>45</sup> Räisänen clearly moves back and forth around the line of inductivism: its reversal is a secondary rationalization that makes inferences "backwards."

to be presented as irredeemably wicked, and every other road to salvation closed to men."<sup>46</sup>

Sociology of knowledge no longer works as a method here. Räisänen does not treat Paul's view as just another independent and justified way to express religious experiences and the feelings of personal bondage. Instead, Paul is now made into an inconsistent thinker who distorts Christian tradition by inventing a bleak picture of humankind. One might be astonished by such a change of attitude in a descriptive history-of-religion program, had one not read Räisänen's other writings. Räisänen is less interested in describing the variety he presumes is there than he is in contesting the theological views Paul represents. For Räisänen, biblical interpretation is normative. It must aim at *Sachkritik*. In the name of reason some theological views must be rejected. Paul, with his dark view of sin, opposes Enlightenment humanism and is guilty of constructing a completely negative view of the human condition.

There are several problems with this conclusion. Here again Räisänen is compelled to rely on a theory that belongs to the weakest layer in Pauline scholarship. After the Sandersian New Perspective (which Räisänen himself claims to support) it is hard to find any scholar who would accept a Platonic explanation of Paul's anthropology and its implications for hamartology. It is Paul the Jew, or Paul the Pharisee, who develops Christian theology. The leading principles of soteriology have been retrieved from the Scriptures, as the extensive *dicta probantia* in Paul's letters show. This is not sufficient for Räisänen, though. In order to prove his case he needs to reveal a diversity that leaves no room for "harmonization." For Räisänen, there is no theological unity behind the multiple descriptions of the human condition in Paul or the entire New Testament.<sup>47</sup>

Does all this sound credible? According to other New Testament theologies the situation in New Testament times was not that problematic. The Jesus of the gospels appears to build on a very dark anthropology. Even the best people in society need to repent. Hamartology is at the fore of his proclamation: priests in the temple and pharisees who teach the

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<sup>46</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 148. There is a difficult theological problem here. It is true that Second Temple Jewish theology was synergistic, to use an anachronistic term, but in the New Testament one no longer finds such theology. New Testament writers agree on the one important issue, namely that people laboring under sin are under God's wrath and divine judgment.

<sup>47</sup> As we saw in chapter 7, many recent New Testament theologies interpret Paul as a Jewish theologian who has found a messianic content for his message.

masses cannot avoid God's just judgment. Paul develops similar ideas but the main point remains the same: all have sinned. Since the same anthropology prevails from the book of Hebrews up to the Revelation, it is justified to question Räisänen's diversity-thesis as it applies to hamartology.

Furthermore, Räisänen cannot avoid promoting an ideology that really has no point of contact with the New Testament itself. His antagonism towards the biblical concept of sin in the present book derives from Enlightenment optimism which, after the Second World War, is almost completely out of fashion. Even though most theologians and philosophers no longer call sin sin, their view of the human condition is closer to Paul's than to Räisänen's. This is not an easy world whose problems could be solved lightly. Räisänen chooses other explanations. As the previous analyses have shown, he has constructed an anthropology according to which all human beings in this Darwinian world struggle with similar everyday issues. To call occasional human selfishness sin in people's search for an ethical life is only spiritual violence.<sup>48</sup>

In "A Historical Epilogue" Räisänen then complains that, in the course of history, a happier and lighter version of religion lost the battle. Pelagius' optimistic vision could have changed the situation in the Church and returned theology to its original form, but Augustine with his Pauline pessimism defeated him. Räisänen is convinced that, "it is Pelagius who stood in continuity with the bulk of biblical tradition and early Christianity." Were the Church to want to be biblical now and follow the great tradition, it should renounce Pauline imaginings.<sup>49</sup>

It is indeed quite astonishing that Augustine's radical novel views came to prevail in Western Christianity. Augustine leaned on Paul's radical, artificial line of thought, though for reasons quite other than Paul's; the Reformation followed suit. Apart from the radical side of Paul, early Christianity before

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<sup>48</sup> As we noted before, this is reminiscent of Spong's rejection of the idea of the sinful people who deserve to be punished. "We are frightened, insecure people who have achieved the enormous breakthrough into self-consciousness that marks no other creature that has yet emerged from the evolution cycle." Spong, *Sins of Scripture*, 173–174. Räisänen does not adopt Spongian rhetoric and he never speaks of the biblical God as a "child abuser" but, in a way similar to Räisänen, he believes that sacrificial religion represents violence. Cf. Spong: "This interpretation of Jesus as the sacrificed victim is a human creation, not a divine revelation." Such a view would only justify "the most destructive and demeaning of human emotions." Spong, *Sins of Scripture*, 173.

<sup>49</sup> In practice Räisänen hardly ever treats the "chain" of different interpretation in a neutral way. Instead, his normative verdicts are numerous. He also uses the principle of "originality," as he does in this case, too. According to Räisänen, there was an original Christianity that was free and tolerant until the invasion of violent Pauline dogmatism.

Augustine is much closer to Judaism (and Islam!) than to mainstream Protestantism with regard to the issue of the human condition.<sup>50</sup>

Reading Paul in the light of later denominational contradictions hardly solves the scholarly problems concerning the original convictions of Paul himself. Even less can one expect it to give any normative certainty about the primacy of Pelagius' version of Christian life. Instead, Pelagius' view apparently comes closest to what post-Enlightenment humanists think about the restrictions on human life.

Should Räisänen's argumentation comprise merely such personal convictions and generalizations, his book would probably find few empathizers. Too often his text turns into a post-Christian philosophy of religion. It lacks academic argumentation and presents eccentric views for which he often can find only one or two supporters in the whole history of research. Gradually the reader begins to wonder if the diversity thesis can actually be justified at all? The diversity Räisänen postulates cannot be found in Christianity as it is generally known but, if anywhere, in the wide Mediterranean world filled with different religions. He simply needs better arguments.

#### 8.4. *Dissolving Christology*

From the early article *Authority* onwards, Christology was an important argument for Räisänen in establishing the diversity of early Christian theology. The *Rise* follows in the same footsteps even though the tone has been changed a little. In this chapter, however, the reader faces the same difficulty that he or she faces in the monograph in general. Instead of creating a new analysis based on sociological investigation, Räisänen collates several of the liberal interpretations of early Christology that have been presented in historical-critical investigation. Furthermore, his analysis here repeats the theoretical problem that was discussed before: he seldom claims that the New Testament text itself, usually referring to Paul's letters, would support the view he detects by his analysis. Instead, he suggests that a scholar is able to discern earlier phases of tradition that necessarily imply ideas that the present author (like Paul) no longer subscribes to.

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<sup>50</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 153.

The Easter event seems to have made little impact on the transmitters of Q. In this document, no weight is put on the resurrection of Jesus, which is not even mentioned in so many words; the emphasis lies entirely on Jesus' mission and teaching and the more or less imminent coming of the Son of Man. A comparable lack of interest is later found in the reports of the views of the conservative Jewish Christian Ebionites, who regarded Jesus as a righteous man who received a special task and a spiritual equipment in his baptism. Resurrection here seems to be more like an appendix to the career of a teacher and a prophet.<sup>51</sup>

Such a beginning is to be expected, even though it mainly builds on the *argument of silence* like in the case of Q. Furthermore, Räisänen is well aware of the scholarly discussion according to which the Sayings-source (Q) is not a standard gospel with an ecclesial intention. Scholars seldom use it as a source for dogmatic discourse. Most scholars today do not assume that there would be an independent congregation behind that source, nor that such a congregation would not have proclaimed Jesus' resurrection.<sup>52</sup> Ebionites, in turn, are known only from the second century and even there, in their gnostic theology, resurrection is not mentioned in the speculations over Christology. Neither the Bible nor early Church Fathers ever mention issues that would actually relate to what Räisänen claims here.<sup>53</sup>

In the light of Räisänen's earlier writings (see 5.4.) and his reliance on Käsemann's list of contradictions it is in fact somewhat surprising that, after the ambivalent opening described above, Räisänen offers a rather conciliatory treatment of early Christology. Christology is no longer his main argument in the diversity project. Anyone familiar with Räisänen's previous debates over Christology can easily see that he is more cautious in his views than earlier. This can be seen already in his treatment of Easter experiences.

On the whole, however, the Easter experiences started a far-reaching process of interpretation among the followers of Jesus. These visions, in which Jesus was apparently seen or felt as a luminous presence, gave rise to the conviction that he had been exalted to a heavenly throne next to God. Various existing traditions may have facilitated such an interpretation,

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<sup>51</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 198.

<sup>52</sup> On the history of Q-studies, see Tuckett, *ABD* 5 (1992) 567–572.

<sup>53</sup> Räisänen has apparently borrowed the argument concerning the Ebionites from Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 239–245. To my understanding, Dunn's theory relies on late sources and can no longer be defended in the scholarly field, see Eskola, *Messiah and the Throne*, 299–309.



for example the notion of exaltation ("rapture") of humans (for example, Enoch) to heaven or the conviction that righteous martyrs would be vindicated. Psalm 110:1, a promise by Yahweh to the Israelite king believed to be recorded by David ("The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet' ") was repeatedly cited to explain what had happened.<sup>54</sup>

This is something one would not expect in a study like the *Rise*. Räisänen describes the features of the earliest resurrection Christology in the same manner as most recent authors. First of all, the resurrection event is not removed from the picture. Secondly, resurrection Christology is described as enthronement Christology where exaltation is justified by a divine promise in Psalm 110. Thirdly, such a messianic interpretation implies Jesus Christ's absolute power on the heavenly throne of glory. The pattern is somewhat similar to that describing the exaltation of Old Testament heroes but the aim of the Christology is new. In scholarship, these are the very features of high Christology.<sup>55</sup>

Remaining loyal to his commitments Räisänen naturally wants to interpret such expressions in the context of an adoptionist view, even though this is no longer easy. He only states that low Christology has to be the protagonist of high Christology for logical reasons: "If a Christology 'from below' did not exist at a very early stage, one wonders how it could have come into existence at all, given the increasing tendency to venerate Jesus in very exalted ways."<sup>56</sup> Apart from this, he does not widen his investigation of exaltation Christology as most scholars in this situation do but, instead, he searches for incidental arguments that would support his "low" view. These comprise Luke's way of speaking of Jesus as servant, as well as some passages in the Epistle to the Hebrews that speak of Jesus' "appointment." As Räisänen says in the Finnish translation of the *Rise*, these are to be considered "traces" of low Christology. The case is weak. In a situation where most other scholars interpret the data in favor for high Christology, Räisänen holds to his adoptionist views.

The final contradiction concerns devotion to Jesus. In contemporary Christological study, this is the actual argument that speaks for high Christology. In Jewish thought, no other person or character can ever be venerated like Yahweh. And here Räisänen starts positively: "From the

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<sup>54</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 198.

<sup>55</sup> For the particular studies on Psalm 110, see for instance Hengel, *Anfänge*; and *Studies in Early Christology*, as well as Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*.

<sup>56</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 199.

beginning, believers venerated the risen Jesus as their Lord whose return to take over power in the world they awaited—and anticipated in their worship.” In the texts, this conviction is confirmed by “the cultic acclamation *kyrios Iesous*” as Räisänen notes. This, however, is where Räisänen stops. He never agrees with scholars like Hurtado, who see these features as the very justification for high Christology. Räisänen knows the main theories in Christological study and also discusses them in his footnotes, but he refuses to make the same conclusions. “Such devotion to someone other than God is unprecedented in the context of Jewish monotheism, but it does not equate Jesus with God.”<sup>57</sup> Räisänen then speculates about the veneration and its implications but he never touches the most important aspect of this issue: that this risen Jesus and confession of him saves. Overall in New Testament theology, faith in Christ fulfills the function of Israel’s faith in God.<sup>58</sup>

Next Räisänen proceeds to issues like the virgin birth and pre-existence but here the original task of the diversity-program is no longer that important. He just explicates the standard historical-critical view on both of these theological issues. Räisänen presents the evolutionary (Hegelian) pattern concerning the development of early Christology: adoption–subordination–divinity–incarnation. His main emphasis is not to claim that these theological views would be incompatible with resurrection Christology but, instead, that they just appear to be unacceptable for the modern humanist. There is discrepancy, of course, if one accepts Räisänen’s adoptionist view on exaltation Christology because then the main purpose in detecting all possible traits of diversity in New Testament writings has lost its sharpest point. His concessions to exaltation Christology have weakened the claim concerning irreconcilable diversity. Räisänen’s main point was to show once more that the historical-critical reconstruction has proven the whole Christian religion fictitious. Therefore, also in the case of Christology, Räisänen does not actually bring anything essentially new to the discussion. His conclusions are as weak as were the theories of Strauss or Bousset, as they are read today.

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<sup>57</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 201.

<sup>58</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 201. His argument goes as follows: “The scholarly debate whether one should speak of worship (Hurtado) or only of veneration of Jesus (Dunn) appears to be a battle over words: both sides acknowledge both that Lord Jesus enjoys an extraordinary status in the cult, and that the boundary line between the Father and him has not been crossed.”

This is in fact a rather important question for the content of New Testament theology. Historical criticism has for a long time been interested in creating those evolutionary patterns that were hinted at above. For several scholars working in the historicist tradition the alleged development of Christological thought and the gradual "divinization" of Jesus in ecclesial theology was a proof that the person of Jesus was never divine. This made these scholars prioritize Christologies and, sometimes, see them in competition. This, however, is not yet theological diversity, as noted.

There is another difficult question concerning Räisänen's view on Jesus and the consistency of his explanation. As noted before, Räisänen follows Sanders' eschatological interpretation of Jesus' proclamation. This means that, for Räisänen, the historical Jesus warned his hearers of an imminent end of the world and God's divine judgment. Räisänen allows for a rather high view of the historical Jesus—at least if we compare his presentation with the Reimarus-Strauss tradition or the Bultmannian solution. Concerning the resurrection experiences Räisänen even says:

More weight can be put on the general point that principal followers of Jesus interpreted their Easter experiences with the aid of resurrection language: God had *raised Jesus from the dead*. Other ways for interpreting the visions would have been available [...] The choice of this particular idiom suggests that the resurrection of the dead had intrigued Jesus' followers already before his death. It is a plausible inference that Jesus himself had turned their thought in this direction (or rather shared the hope they would have held anyway) by telling them that the imminent drama would involve the resurrection of the dead. The cognitive dissonance caused by his fate was then overcome with the aid of the explanation, propelled by the Easter visions, that Jesus had indeed been raised. He was a special case, though: he had been raised before the others and translated to heaven to await the carrying out of his special task.<sup>59</sup>

Räisänen thus agrees that, as far as Jesus' identity is concerned, he actually acted as some kind of messianic figure, at least an eschatological prophet who will himself take part in the last events of known history and the transformation of the whole world. With Sanders, Räisänen builds a picture of an eschatological figure who is exceptional in his environment.

Now the simple question runs as follows: should this view not be taken seriously when the nature of early Christology and the development of New Testament theology is assessed? If Jesus' teaching has, against all the results of the Schweitzerian Jesus-quest and Bultmann's historical frustration,

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<sup>59</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 88.

explicit continuity with the exaltation Christology of the early post-Easter Churches, should this affect Räisänen's interpretation of the development of essential theological themes and motives in the flow of tradition? After all, Räisänen repeatedly reminds his readers that he is interested in the chain of interpretation, in rereadings and new interpretations of theological themes in a particular vein of tradition. What I mean here is that Räisänen's own view about the historical Jesus becomes a test case for his history-of-religion theory. If the *Rise* were read in order to find a consistent link between Jesus' teaching and the Christology of the early apostolic Church, even the book itself would give readers a view that continuity is possible in principle.

There are also other reasons to expect some elaboration on the continuity theme. First of all, one just needs to consult recent Jesus-scholarship of the "third quest" in order to see that Sanders' suggestions have grown into a fruitful field where several scholars have explained Jesus' message according to such premises. Sanders, working on the suggestions of Ben F. Meyer, proposed that Jesus' identity can best be detected in the event of his arrival in Jerusalem. The ride to the city on a donkey meant a religious performance that proclaimed the actualization of Old Testament prophecies. The nation that has not found its freedom after the exile and whose cult cannot be considered pure encounters the eschatological figure who, according to Zecharias, must be the builder of the final temple—God's temple of salvation. For Sanders, this was also the reason for Jesus' demonstration in the Temple area: he claimed that the present Temple could not serve as a stage for God's redemptive acts.<sup>60</sup>

N.T. Wright developed Sanders' theory by maintaining that, for Jesus, the exile was not over yet. There were several signs of a continuing exile, and even Jewish theologians knew of them. Wright concludes that this feature explains Jesus' eschatological aims best. Jesus is destined to build a third Temple, a Temple not made with hands, and a Temple that consists of living stones.<sup>61</sup>

According to Brant Pitre there were other features in Jesus' message that confirm this kind of explanation. Very early in his career Jesus confronted the fact that John the Baptist was arrested and executed. For Jesus, this meant that the final phase of tribulation had begun. This is why Jesus, too, proclaimed that destruction was imminent. The nation opposed its God

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<sup>60</sup> Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, building on Ben F. Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus*.

<sup>61</sup> Wright, *Victory of God*, 413, 428, 433.

and killed the prophets that were sent to it. Even Jesus himself might have to face a violent death. But when the final tribulation is over, God will bring retribution and redeem the chosen ones. The pious will rule in the heavenly Kingdom and they will be lead by the Son of Man, apparently Jesus himself because no other alternatives for that role were at hand.<sup>62</sup>

As these kinds of theological themes were given new meaning and actual signification after Jesus' resurrection, an eschatological interpretation prevailed. The resurrection was seen as Jesus' enthronement on the throne of glory. God's Kingdom was interpreted as Jesus Christ's Kingdom which he ruled by his word of redemption and mercy. Confession to the God of Israel turned into a confession to the resurrected Christ in power, "through God the Father." All essential features of salvific faith focus now on Jesus. His death is interpreted as redemption both for the sins of Israel—ending the exile—and for all the nations living under God's wrath.

Räisänen does pay attention to most of these features in the *Rise*. As we saw above, he describes early exaltation Christology in terms of heavenly enthronement. For some reason, however, he does not argue for the connection or effect they have on each other. He does not pick up the "chain of interpretation" that would concern these theological motives. Instead, he remains surprisingly negative when assessing these features. One gets the impression that Räisänen is so determined to reveal the alleged diversity of the Christological views of early communities that he overlooks the material he himself presents. In this respect, he does not follow Sanders' theory in the sense the adherents of the third quest have done. Instead, Räisänen uses the eschatological theme only for his own purposes: to show that Jesus was mistaken and the parousia never occurred.

This, then, is a crucial point and where the consistency of Räisänen's explanation must be questioned. If New Testament theology has these features, the diversity he speaks of must apparently derive from a wider field—and this of course is what Räisänen has constantly maintained. The picture remains vague as long as we read only Jewish apocalyptic groups, small sectarian groups reconstructed with the help of the historical-critical method, gnostic groups after the canonical phase, and some Church fathers that have not gained general acceptance for their views. But, nevertheless, one is left with the question: does this really deconstruct the conviction that in the New Testament itself there are consistent theological

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<sup>62</sup> See Brant Pitre's ideas in his dissertation on the theme of tribulation, *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of the Exile*, 32, 221, 510–512.

themes that can be depicted with a standard analysis of New Testament theology?

We are left with an annoying dissonance. Firstly, Räisänen states that there is no consistent material for a New Testament theology whatsoever, and this is why the whole field must be opened to a wider reality. When all possible groups representing all possible views and arguments are assessed, there is no such thing as New Testament theology. Secondly, however, in his *Rise*, Räisänen himself provides material and a theory proposed by Sanders that together prove that a rather consistent theological development can, after all, be detected among the canonical writings. We must emphasize that this is no minor problem because, in the footsteps of Strauss and Bultmann, these particular theological themes would have been—and indeed were—classified merely as the imaginative creation of post-Easter community. Räisänen must be well aware of this when adopting Sanders' eschatological view of Jesus among his premises.

What should one make of it? Which direction does the logical inference run in? Räisänen has claimed that there is no New Testament theology, and this is why a history-of-religion program must be carried out. In his book he admits that the canonical writings actually do follow some kind of consistent theology deriving from the historical Jesus and continuing in the Christology of the earliest post-Easter community. The diversity he postulates is a constant reality outside canonical theology. What can explain why Räisänen, despite this kind of reality, chooses to focus on diversity? There are at least two answers to this. Firstly, Räisänen apparently focuses on the phenomenon of religion, not the New Testament in particular. And secondly, he attempts to make sense of the results the historical-critical schools have produced through the centuries. The former issue remains to be discussed later, but the latter can be commented on now.

These examples illuminate another surprising feature in Räisänen's history-of-religion project. He does not really provide a completely new analysis of the alleged variety of New Testament material and the beliefs they represent or imply. His examples and ideas come often from his Finnish books, his work on Paul in *Paul and the Law*, and even his early analyses of the Quran. There is just one problem in relying on older investigations. Even his own evidence concerning different presentations of Christology, for instance, has turned out to be ambiguous. Can a collection of historical-critical results from the twentieth century prove his case?

Räisänen's next problem concerns the quality of his evidence. In order to justify his claim about diversity Räisänen usually picks up the most

liberal view available. This, even though in his case probably logical as it is, starts to sound deliberate and one-sided. In any case, the variety of views Räisänen here presents is not the result of some new and groundbreaking analysis that would contribute to the current of scholarship he belongs to. His new approach apparently does not need a completely new analysis. Instead, it is based on a compilation of quite standard historical-critical results—despite certain eccentric examples—and a minimalist view both of the historical Jesus and New Testament theology.

Had Räisänen been content with writing a history-of-religion description of certain intertextual moves in ancient Jewish-Christian tradition, his book would probably have looked much more eloquent. He could have explained how themes were adopted and appropriated, and also how some new ones were created in the process. This, however, is not what Räisänen wishes to do. As we have seen during this study of his hermeneutics, Räisänen, from the very start of his project, aims at a Reimarian deconstruction of traditional Christian belief. His aim is to reveal the irreconcilable diversity of early Christian thought. For him, the symbolic worlds of early groups differ irreconcilably. In his Weberian sociology of religion theology is a human construction. His grand vision in writing the *Rise* is in sorting out the whole panorama of theological imagination. Räisänen wants to prove his theory that it is impossible to write a New Testament theology.

In this respect, Räisänen's work must, at least in part, be considered an attempt to find an explanatory hermeneutical program for historical-critical ideas. His history-of-religion approach provides a means for interpreting the diversity Räisänen himself has experienced as a radical historical-critical scholar. In this sense, it can be seen as one more apologetical program that aspires to find something significant behind the situation after Reimarus, Strauss, and Bultmann have left us. What makes Räisänen's hermeneutics extraordinary, however, is that he tries to make diversity a new standard. His interpretation remains normative till the very end. One of the clearest examples of this is his treatment of orthodoxy.

### 8.5. *Against Doctrine*

The hermeneutical treatment of New Testament theology is completely dependent on how one defines doctrine. As we are dealing with Räisänen's main work, and the analysis thus far has proven that he uses practically all of his hermeneutical findings in this monograph, we can assume that it



represents his views best and on the highest level of generalization. What is of special interest here is Räsänen's view on doctrine. During the analysis we have noted that Räsänen, in many of his works, contests the idea of any permanent doctrine—or even the possibility in principle.

In the *Rise* Räsänen discusses doctrines and orthodoxy in detail. He exploits philosophy-of-religion ideas and applies them to the interpretation of the New Testament. In his presentation Christology in particular is accused of throwing the Christian world into confusion. The seeds sowed already in the New Testament, and particularly in the Gospel of John, grow later into contradictions that could dissolve the whole Church: “a Jesus with a genuinely human body but with a superhuman consciousness.” An ideological and theological contradiction is clear here. And according to Räsänen, this could only lead to problems. “To harmonize it with such evidence as pointed to his full and normal humanity was an impossible task from the start.”<sup>63</sup>

Harmonization was on the list of leading early Church procedures. Räsänen is confident that power struggles started as soon as theologians attempted to define Jesus' real nature. This very theoretical debate led to severe confrontations. With John Knox, Räsänen states:

In this “distressingly human story,” “deep emotions and profound intolerance stirred up councils, churches and armies of monks into horrific attacks upon one another, and to the excommunication and exile of upright and sincere church leaders.”<sup>64</sup>

Even though there were problems concerning the idea of Trinity already in the New Testament, this does not interest Räsänen. In his *Rise* he follows the lines of his earlier writings where he stated that the doctrine of the Trinity has no basis in the New Testament.<sup>65</sup> It is a much later construction. This is why his argument is now weighted towards the post-canonical Church. Räsänen is interested in the role of the creeds in the established Church. The councils, one after another, could not find any real solution to the basic problem that, for Räsänen, is most likely philosophical.

One last time, let us listen to John Knox: “Whatever ‘one Person’—in, say, the Chalcedonian statement—is taken to mean, how can two ‘natures’ (each presumably involving consciousness and will) belong to it ‘inconfusedly,

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<sup>63</sup> Räsänen, *Rise*, 225.

<sup>64</sup> Räsänen, *Rise*, 225; referring to Knox.

<sup>65</sup> See especially chapter 5 above.

unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably"? I cannot pretend to understand how this could be . . . What I do venture to assert . . . with great conviction, is this: of no normal human being could such things be truly said . . . We can have the humanity without the pre-existence and we can have the pre-existence without the humanity. There is absolutely no way of having both."<sup>66</sup>

A critical reading of different creeds is no novelty in Räisänen's theology. As we saw earlier, he has discussed the sensibility of creeds already in the 1970s. Therefore, an antagonism towards Christian confessions is not the result of a sociology of knowledge or Räisänen's later hermeneutics. Instead, it is part of a historical-critical reading of the Bible and belongs to the sphere of Wredean hermeneutics.

In Räisänen's *Rise*, the debate mentioned above consistently turns into a question about the Trinity. "What started as an effort to solve the problem of Jesus' relation to God had slowly developed into the problem of the Trinity: three persons within one and the same God."<sup>67</sup> It is not merely a question how Jesus' person could and should be understood. Simultaneously, it is a question of how the very concept of God should be interpreted.

The history of the doctrine of the Trinity for Räisänen, thus, represents an example of a violent power struggle that has tainted and corrupted the Church. It has led to the exclusion of perfectly innocent thinkers and sincere theologians. In this sense it is a perfect example of defiled orthodoxy, an attitude that no longer accepts that all versions of the symbolic world are valid but only wishes to gain power in the community. Gradually, in the *Rise*, this leads to another discussion where we find a repetition of Räisänen's critique against the idea of Trinity, now supported by several comments by different contemporary scholars.

This is a rare passage where Räisänen's sense of style fails, and he starts to write almost an atheist-like counter-apology against the doctrine of Trinity. He refers to "ordinary Christians" and returns to the 1977 pamphlet *The Myth of God Incarnate* that we discussed in earlier chapters.

While many (most?) theologians continue to regard the doctrine of the Trinity and a realistic understanding of the incarnation as indispensable, ordinary Christians are often perplexed. One experienced teacher had to write a book on Christology based on the assumption that "*believers* today are not convinced that Christology is essential to their faith." No wonder, then, that a reorientation has been taking place in many quarters. For example, the

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<sup>66</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 226.

<sup>67</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 226.

contributors to *The Myth of God Incarnate*, a volume edited by John Hick in 1977, emphatically sided with the early “recognition that Jesus was . . . ‘a man approved by God’ for a special role within the divine purpose” (Acts 2:22). Sharing the thoughts of “a growing number of Christians, both professional theologians and lay people,” they stated that the conception of Jesus as the Second Person of the Trinity living a human life is a “*poetic* way of expressing his significance for us.”<sup>68</sup>

For Räsänen, Christian doctrine in general, and the doctrine of the Trinity in particular, are obstacles that prevent rational Christians from living a good Christian life. Here again, the abandonment of the doctrine of Trinity, for Räsänen and his precursors, is a freeing experience and leads to a new open dialogue with other world religions.

And they went on: “This recognition is called for in the interests of truth; but it also has increasingly important practical implications for our relationship to the peoples of the other great world religions.” During the past quarter of a century, similar metaphoric approaches to Christology have increasingly been taken, not least in the context of interfaith dialogue.<sup>69</sup>

Such an outburst would be quite incomprehensible had one not read Reimarus’ apology against the imaginative *Systema* of the post-Easter Church. In the liberal tradition there is an apologetic tendency to promote Enlightenment ideology, and often Deism, in the Christian Church. Räsänen does not support traditional Deism, in spite of using the term “natural theology,” as we have noted elsewhere, but he subscribes to the “interest of truth.” Throughout his career Räsänen has strived after scientific truth about the Bible, as well as other religious writings.

But why is the doctrine of the Trinity connected so easily with interfaith dialogue? Other monotheist religions have not shown any particular interest in close ecumenical theology or good relations—rather the opposite. Why should low Christology and the rejection of the belief in the Trinity make a difference? In earlier chapters we have suggested that the influence of Immanuel Kant is essential in these issues. The epistemology of Western liberal Protestantism grows from the seeds sown by *Marburger neukantianer*. It is probable that even liberal scholars no longer recognize the historical roots of their thinking, but here the source is quite clear. As Kant proposed, a religion based on “pure reason alone” must be universal. It belongs to the realm of noumena, things that reason—anywhere and

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<sup>68</sup> Räsänen, *Rise*, 227. For the discussion on *The Myth of God Incarnate*, see chapter 6.

<sup>69</sup> Räsänen, *Rise*, 227.

used by anyone—can detect. Its basic content is ethical, since this is the only rational way to understand the divine purpose.

According to the universalist interpretation, any religion, in principle, is an attempt to explicate the human situation in a particular context. As religions are analyzed and deconstructed, their true nature will be revealed. This is what Räsänen, too, aspires to do. His analysis focuses on the sociological ground upon which any symbolic world is built. He postulates a religion of the “pure reason,” the universal ideal of religion that works behind all possible local explications of religious ideas. Räsänen’s many ties with Kantian philosophy may at least partly be accidental. Kant apparently is not a primary source. Nevertheless, his theology, as well as hermeneutics, betray a Kantian influence. His thinking has several Kantian features, and the belief in the universalist nature of the phenomenon of religion is one of them. Räsänen also believes that pure religion means interpreting one’s changing life-situations in a rational way.

Furthermore, Räsänen’s counter-apology against doctrines is dependent on his view that any symbol representing a religious experience is valid. For him, there is no such thing as heresy. Heresy belongs to power structures. It is merely a tool for oppression and violence. The idea of pure doctrine, orthodoxy, creates those “horrific attacks” and “excommunications” he spoke about. Hence, doctrine may be a dangerous concept. The birth of the canon is part of the politics of ecclesial power. This is why his *Rise* culminates in a chapter called “Toward Christian Orthodoxy.”

The original doctrinal diversity was increasingly regarded as a problem, and by the second century various groups asserted themselves as the only bearer of the true faith (conceived of as the right doctrine), to the exclusion of others. In the course of these debates one could appeal to three main authorities: scripture, tradition, and persons. All three were closely interconnected: tradition was based on scripture, but it also dictated how to interpret scripture; the trustworthiness of the tradition again depended on that of the persons who had transmitted it, and of those who now guarded it.<sup>70</sup>

In the beginning there was chaos. Räsänen believes in an “original doctrinal diversity.” In this respect he has learned also from another Neo-Kantian, Adolf von Harnack, who claimed that Christianity in its most original form was just a fervid movement that had no doctrines whatsoever. The Church’s dogma, for Harnack, was the result of mental stagnation. He

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<sup>70</sup> Räsänen, *Rise*, 301.

called it degeneration that led mainly to hierarchy and negative power structures. Räsänen's vision of ecclesial evolution is not far from this.

As we recall Räsänen's hermeneutical theory, heresy is actually a positive concept. With Berger he speaks about a "heretical imperative" that is obligatory in a "valid" interpretation of early Christian religion. In the sociological reading of religion, symbolic worlds change from time to time. Following Berger, Räsänen is convinced that such changes constantly turn out to contest previous religious views. In addition to this, Räsänen appears to question the nature of heresy by relying on the old Bauer-Koester theory. According to Bauer's view, in many regions heresy was the original manifestation of Christianity. In a historical sense, it is not possible to describe any solid line of development from orthodoxy to heresy. And, the thesis says, a distinction between heresy and orthodoxy is "irrelevant for the historian."<sup>71</sup> Räsänen too, as we saw above, speaks of the "original diversity" of early Christian teaching, in the light of which it would be impossible to outline any acceptable definition of heresy.

Moreover, according to Räsänen, the pattern of violent intolerance is innate in Christianity, and therefore hard to fight. "The violent, authoritarian intolerance that has characterized much of subsequent church history as well is, in part at least, to be traced back to the early documents of the Jesus movement." Paul had set the tone, says Räsänen, and "other writers followed suit."<sup>72</sup> Doctrine, for Räsänen, is a negative concept. It represents a violent schematization of reality. As it is a typical tool of hierarchies, it inevitably creates intolerance. In fact, it is difficult to find any other kind of treatment of doctrines in Räsänen's writings. He appears to believe that the phenomenon of doctrine has been born from power structures.

This view is in line with Räsänen's historicist hermeneutics. By using almost Harnackian language Räsänen claims that the earliest Christianity was a network of exuberant groups whose faith was grounded on spiritual experiences that as yet had no rational form or doctrinal content. All his academic life Räsänen has called this reality a process of endless interpretation that did not follow any rules whatsoever.

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<sup>71</sup> See Balla's summary of the Bauer-Koester theory in Balla, *NDBT* (2000) 22. When referring to Bauer's views he uses Strecker's introduction in the preface to the second edition of Bauer's work.

<sup>72</sup> Räsänen, *Rise*, 313–314.

Since the whole Bible consists of one huge process of interpretation, it is difficult to understand why this process should have stopped in some Councils where official doctrines were constructed by Church leaders who disagree with each other and stand in the conflict of pressures created by different theological and political currents.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, this view also summarizes the aim of Räsänen's *Rise*. As the history-of-religion approach attempts to describe the diversity of ideas, Räsänen has presented the reality of early Christianity as a battle between religious ideologies. In his last book he draws all conclusions possible from the hermeneutical situation described above. "Whichever of the themes discussed in this book one explores, it seems clear that a great diversity of attitudes and ideas reigns."<sup>74</sup>

What then, concerning the relation of history and interpretation, is the important hermeneutical principle to be derived from Räsänen's thinking? It could be called historical-critical diversity. Räsänen is convinced that historical-critical investigation of the Bible has revealed the basic structure of early Christian teaching. There is no unity and no doctrinal consensus among the congregations. This influential principle functions in Räsänen's writings long before the *Rise* and even before the appearance of his sociology of knowledge. It is based on the German historical-critical methodology that Räsänen and his young colleagues found in the 1960s. Already in the monographs and articles from 1971–1972 one can see how historical-critical investigation of the New Testament leads Räsänen reject biblical authority and the reality of doctrines. For him, there is no theology in a normative sense. Like Bultmann, Räsänen states that theological propositions have no truth value, even though his arguments differ from those of Bultmann.

There is a slight paradox here, though. There are doctrines—and there must be. The diversity of early Christian theology can be detected only in the (constructed) contradiction between different doctrines. Räsänen does not claim the non-existence of the phenomenon of doctrines but the reality of doctrines. Doctrines, for him, have no metaphysical justification. This is why Räsänen starts to build a sociological explanation of Christian teaching. This aim finds new tools when he discovers the new poststructuralist methodology of the sociology of knowledge. The chain of interpretation understood in terms of creating and recreating a symbolic world

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<sup>73</sup> Räsänen, *Raamattunäkemyksiä etsimässä*, 151.

<sup>74</sup> Räsänen, *Rise*, 317.

provides an immanent theory for the emergence of conflicting teachings and finally contradictory doctrines.<sup>75</sup>

Some theoretical problems inevitably follow. Räisänen drifts into conflict with Theissen who wants to use semiotics in the construction of doctrinal beliefs. Theissen also holds that Christian language is an autonomic religious language. For Theissen the “grammar of religious language” can explain unity in New Testament teaching. He seeks for an intrasystemic truth of the signs that, basically, are linguistic. Even though Räisänen rejects this kind of approach, as we have seen, it is not that far from his own theory. The cultural symbols that the sociology of knowledge investigates are linguistic symbols. Read from that point of view, doctrines are linguistic phenomena.

This, of course, is not what Räisänen opposes. He just opposes the idea that there would be systemic order in theology. The problem is ontological. One can no longer argue for a basic unity of early Christian theology. The basic difference between these two scholars is, as stated above, that Räisänen is a nominalist and Theissen is nearer to a realist position. For Räisänen, there are no real theological propositions. There is no grammar of religious thought. All conceptions are constructed in a particular situation. This, of course, is a phenomenological stance, almost in a Husserlian sense. The only peculiar exception is that it concerns only religious language, not language in general.<sup>76</sup>

Furthermore, the question about the canon affects Räisänen’s view on doctrinal diversity. If one abandons the canon as such, it is quite easy to argue for diversity. Examples are remarkable. If on the one hand, we have a reconstruction of early adoptionist Ebionism and, on the other hand, gnostic teachings that speak of a heavenly Christ-radiance, the diversity is convincing. A difficult theoretical question must be posed, though. Does this reading really compete with traditional New Testament theology? If Theissen for instance, without referring to Childs or Matera, is able to

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<sup>75</sup> Such an inconsistency is inscribed in Räisänen’s theory itself, and in the previous chapters we have seen first glimpses on the reasons why he ended up accepting contradictory ideas. He has started as a Wredean history-of-religion scholar but, simultaneously, he has developed in the direction of Weberian sociology. This is a tension similar to what we found in Räisänen’s plan or table of contents in the *Rise*. He wishes to study religious experience but he ends up investigating the development of doctrines instead. This important discrepancy will be discussed in detail in chapter 10.2.

<sup>76</sup> The question about Räisänen’s view of language will be discussed also later in this study.



describe systemic order inside New Testament theology, why should it be categorically rejected?<sup>77</sup>

The final conclusion concerning Räsänen's treatment of doctrines is that, for him, they represent merely human imagination. According to his Weberian hermeneutics the symbolic world the first Christians created, used and modified is only a human construction. It develops in terms of social change. Given this point of departure, Christian doctrines about Jesus and salvation have no truth value. The Reimarian attitude has found confirmation in Berger's sociology of knowledge. In his *Rise*, Räsänen not only wishes to explain his view of the history of early Christian religion behind the extant canonical text. In addition to this he attacks traditional Christian faith and nullifies the distinction between pure doctrine and false teaching, orthodoxy and heresy. Like in the ideological writings treated in chapter 6, here too Räsänen abandons both early Christology and the theological tradition of early Christian creeds.

#### 8.6. *Contribution to Contemporary Discussion VIII*

Among the several recent New Testament theologies Räsänen's work remains quite exceptional. Most of the new works are postliberal in their approach. In a sense, Räsänen has attempted to venture onto another kind of front where the history-of-religion approach would prevail. It is true that the *Rise* follows some of the Wredean lines drawn by Rowland and Theissen but, in practice, Räsänen departs even from their methodology. Räsänen's Weberian tack is typically anti-metaphysical and this distances his work from other "Wredean" constructions.

Considering the premises for writing on theology, Räsänen faces many kinds of scholarly problems in his work. As a redaction critic Räsänen drifts into trouble with the "unhistorical Jesus" of German historicism. There is not much "real" history left in Jesus' life and teaching. This is one of the primary problems in his work. The chain of ideas has no proper starting point. Räsänen is unable to create a positive construction of Jesus' identity and message. In this he remains in the past, among the pessimistic scholars from the twentieth century who could not find the historical Jesus or his teaching. The Third Quest for the historical Jesus has little to offer to Räsänen's monograph.

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<sup>77</sup> In Räsänen's case the discussion is polarized. He usually does not accept that any approach other than the ones that are strictly materialist or even secularist could be valid.

One might object and say that this is not what Räsänen attempts to do in the first place. He himself announces that he is *not* writing a New Testament theology. He is not obliged to follow the rules of other writers. This is why he does not need to follow the constructive lines of early teaching at all. Räsänen presupposes the strict historical-critical reconstruction of the genesis of gospel tradition. For him, there is no real history available but merely different confused pictures of Jesus, *post-eventu* written imagings of a “historical” figure. Therefore, Räsänen is determined to focus on diversity and, therefore, he feels justified in picking up only those passages that reveal contradictions and inconsistencies. The aim of the history of religion is to describe the spectrum, not to discuss the depth of each colour. There is one problem: this is not what Räsänen claims or even does in the monograph. Despite his general purpose of writing, Räsänen does attempt to construct certain essential “chains,” developments of theological convictions, particular currents that are linked to each other—and he is also interested in the history of influence, the genesis of ideas. His strategy of explanation is not punctual and fragmentary but linear. There must be a “chain” of interpretation. Otherwise his theory would have little to say to his investigation.

Therefore, the question about the historical Jesus is important. Following Sanders, Räsänen of course builds on eschatology but, this theme too, ends up in something of a catastrophe. According to Räsänen, Jesus may have proclaimed the imminent end of the world but his followers had to deal with another kind of reality: how to construct a new form of Christian faith when nothing happened? In principle, Räsänen stands where Reimarus stood. How to create a new *Systema*? There must be an essential difference between Jesus’ world and the reality of the apostles.

In his theology Räsänen—probably unconsciously—adapts Reimarus’ ideas to a new situation when describing history of complete misunderstanding. Jesus’ pupils must have understood his message incorrectly, or at least their reinterpretation results in a misrepresentation. Räsänen’s Jesus was no Messiah of Israel. He did not appear as the Savior for the world that is about to die in its sins. Anthropology, hamartology, Christology, and soteriology—all these subjects appear as chapters in Räsänen’s book—do not represent anything about Jesus’ teachings in Galilee or Judaea.

Paul too is wrong. According to Räsänen, he understands the Jewish point of departure falsely. He either does not know Jewish theology well enough or—what Räsänen more likely holds—consciously provides a distorted picture of it. In his malevolent teaching Paul wants only to win

the power struggles that are inevitable everywhere in the early congregations. Furthermore, Paul appears to have almost nothing to do with Jesus' original teaching, excluding eschatology. In this respect, Räisänen repeats the old (and otherwise mostly abandoned) claim that Paul actually is the founder of Christianity, at least in its Western form.

The picture that Räisänen gives of the history of Christian religion is based on a powerful reconstruction. Original Christianity, for him, is an incoherent network of dispersed separatist groups that compete with each other. The religious identity of these groups derives first of all from Judaism in one way or another, and only gradually a Christian belief with high its Christology and Christomonist soteriology emerges. This, he says, is possible only when Hellenistic religiosity starts to influence Jewish-Christian thinking by introducing new myths and rites to it. With these ideas Räisänen is one of the last post-Bultmannians to claim on the influence of Hellenistic mystery religions and even gnosticism.

Throughout his *Rise* Räisänen argues on the basis of a naturalist, Darwinian conception of human life. This, too, can be held up as a sign of the Weberian metanarrative working behind Räisänen's reasoning. His oppositions and contradictions are constructed according to the conviction that humanity does *not* live under sin, human beings in no way need reconciliation and redemption, life on earth will not end according to a divine plan the summit of which is the final judgment, and that there will never be a resurrection of the dead that will lead to a new life with God in heaven. In Räisänen's hermeneutics, materialism must prevail. In the grand summary of his lifetime of research, Räisänen thus repeats all the Wolfenbüttelian ideas he ever mentioned about the reality and truthfulness of Christian doctrines.

Despite all this, however, there is an unexpected ambivalence in Räisänen's *Rise*. On the one hand, he does not perform a thorough history-of-religion investigation on early Christian religion. And on the other hand, for some reason, he no longer stresses the theological diversity of the canonical writings, despite the fact that the above-mentioned examples as such present quite a summary of earlier historical-critical work.

As regards the former issue, we have already noted in the preceding chapters that, for some reason, Räisänen does not actually use the science-of-religion methodology in practice.<sup>78</sup> Some of his critics have noted that

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<sup>78</sup> We have seen that Räisänen, in his *Beyond*, says that a comprehensive "history of early Christian religion," namely one concentrating on issues of cult and rite, would be

he does not focus on cultic practices or other religious phenomena, even though his theory would point at that direction. He does not even define different individual groups in a detailed manner, apart from certain quite well-known groups or currents. Instead, he investigates texts and focuses on canonical writings. It is not easy to combine “exegetics” (as he says) with history of religion.<sup>79</sup>

Regarding the latter issue, about the theological diversity of the canonical writings, the *Rise* once again leaves its readers astonished. In many issues that were previously considered major signs of diversity Räisänen appears quite conciliatory. He leaves some doors open to the Third Quest and does not pursue the Christological argument as his predecessors did. Such ambivalence apparently proves that Räisänen, in fact, has not been interested in Wrede for the sake of the latter’s original ideas. Instead, Wrede offered a scholarly justification for replacing New Testament theology with historical-critical reconstruction. Räisänen has moulded previous theories as he has wished. The result can be seen in his sociological hermeneutics, sacralized culturalism, that fulfills the Enlightenment project and finally explains the essence of religion “as it really happened.”

Räisänen’s analysis in the *Rise*, thus, results in an explanation where the basic contradiction lies between the (late) canonical writings and the diverse expressions of Second Temple Jewish theology, most often in a syncretistic Hellenistic environment. Given this ambivalence and Räisänen’s antagonism towards doctrinal orthodox Christianity, he appears to have written *The Rise of Early Jewish Beliefs*. There is no particular Christian identity to Räisänen’s reconstructed groups around 30–50 A.D. Pre-canonical “theology” is adoptionist and traditional in many senses. Neither can there be Christian influence in Jewish writings in the Roman period until the destruction of Jerusalem—texts that Räisänen investigates thoroughly in some chapters. The history-of-religion section in his *Rise* is about diverse Jewish theology in the Second Temple period,

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too difficult to write. Räisänen, *Beyond*, 105. This is an important question, and it raises questions about why he insists on a particular new methodology in such a situation. We shall deal with this problem in chapter 10 below.

<sup>79</sup> Dunn, sympathizing with Räisänen’s basic approach, still criticizes his analysis for not being consistent with his premises. “The focus on beliefs is somewhat surprising for a disciple of Wrede, since Wrede saw the task he proposed and outlined as ‘the history of early Christian religion and theology.’ To focus so intensively on ‘beliefs,’ then, is not such a departure from church histories as the history of doctrine as the early history of religions school called for. More attention to the experience and practice of worship, such as Bousset offered, would have been appropriate.” Dunn, *RBL* 1 (2011).

and Räsänen wishes to see the early expressions of the Jesus-movement an integral part of that. High Christology and doctrinal definitions as well as confessions come into the picture only later on, and Räsänen himself reserves for the canonical writings the right to represent “theology” in the traditional sense of the word.<sup>80</sup>

What Räsänen wishes to emphasize though is the early diversity. In the earliest phase, he believes, there was no doctrinal unity.<sup>81</sup> The theological frustration resulting from such premises is understandable. It is easy to see that Räsänen, in his new appropriation of theology, has given scholars certain premises that inevitably grow from the historical-critical interpretation of early Christian thought. Reading this discussion in the light of the philosophy of science, however, shows that this is no longer theological discourse. Instead, Räsänen’s views and statements resemble the immanent hermeneutics of the “Christian atheist” movement and their death-of-God discourse.

This is an interesting example of an ideology where standard historicist biblical interpretation and ideological *Sachkritische* views meet. Liberal theology had already abandoned most of the same doctrines Räsänen treats in his writings. Sin was usually not held to be a relevant category in anthropology. Principles of Christology were rejected or changed. Atonement lost its attractiveness as a theological category. Bodily resurrection was under suspicion, and life after death began to mean less and less in the materialist eschatology of modern dogmatics.

Räsänen even attacks the concept of God as a divine being who is independent and distinct from the realities of this visible world. In this respect even Reimarus with his Deistic program has a more religious aim in his theology than Räsänen. Scholars like von Harnack and Bultmann, then, were actually apologists in their attempt to save Christian faith for modern humankind. Their interpretation theories, be it the “religion of Jesus” with its Kantian moralism, or the salvific *kerygma* of the existentialist interpretation, were metaphysical programs that attempted to transfer the divine message into the twentieth century. Räsänen, like many Nietzschean theologians, rejects metaphysics. He fights against all traditional

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<sup>80</sup> Stuhlmacher emphasizes the difference between Jewish thought and Christian identity that centers on Jesus. Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie I*, 34. It is not possible to argue for a “Christian” tradition that forms a chain but starts from a pre-canonical group which expresses no faith in Christ at all.

<sup>81</sup> This is obvious because it would be a truism to state that gnosticism differs from orthodox Christianity. Räsänen’s theory rests on the foundation of the alleged “chains” and the start of the evolutionary process is, thus, of utmost importance.

depictions of revelatory Christian doctrine. In this respect, Räisänen's views represent the outermost frontiers of post-Christian theology. In a descriptive sense his work belongs to the area of theology: a Lutheran pastor writing on the New Testament. In an ideological sense, however, Räisänen's hermeneutics have turned into a program that fights Christian belief.

Views like this are no longer very popular in New Testament theology, though. Instead, the ascending radicalism of secularized theology belongs to the last hurrah before postliberal theology took over. Theology that turns into its opposite is a *reductio ad absurdum* that apparently marks the end of a scientific paradigm. There are analogies for this kind of development in New Testament scholarship. The "First Quest" for the historical Jesus ended up in frustration and drifted to a dead end. As Schweitzer, Kümmel, and several other historians have noted, at a certain point scholars could no longer find the historical Jesus. Later this resulted in a complete subversion of historicist Jesus-studies and the birth of the "Third Quest" for the historical Jesus. Furthermore, as we have noted above, the historical-critical method itself had to face a theoretical discussion that questioned both its validity and its indispensability. As regards New Testament theology, one may probably find a consistent line of development from the days of Reimarus to the final descriptions of atheist a/theology, but this does not mitigate the conclusion. Theology without God, without Christ's saving acts, and without the Holy Spirit that directs the Church, is a paradox without a solution.

This is probably why postliberal currents have emerged on every continent. In Germany, for instance, the new Tübingen school started to question theological reductionism in issue after issue. Martin Hengel wrote on Christology, and Peter Stuhlmacher focused on justification. The latter then wrote a significant biblical theology of the New Testament restoring the basic theological ideas of New Testament writings. In the United States, in turn, Brevard Childs introduced renewed canonical criticism of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>82</sup>

Later, narrative biblical theology became very popular through Kevin Vanhoozer's *The Drama of Doctrine*. Vanhoozer suggests narrative hermeneutics where the descriptive content of biblical writings are treated

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<sup>82</sup> One can start with smaller openings provided for instance by Hengel, *Der Sohn Gottes*; and Stuhlmacher, *Gerechtigkeit Gottes*; but gradually these views developed into extensive monographs on New Testament theology; see Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie I*; Hengel and Schwemer, *Jesus*. For canonical criticism, see Childs, *Biblical Theology*.

with the help of communication theories. Ben Witherington III relies on Vanhoozer when writing his own New Testament theology. In addition to this, one could mention the New Testament scholar Anthony Thiselton who, in his *Hermeneutics of Doctrine* provides a thorough investigation of the relation between biblical theology and dogmatics. His extensive analysis focuses on the scriptural attestation of important dogmatic categories, and issues like Christology and atonement are given a detailed treatment.<sup>83</sup>

Contemporary discussion, thus, focuses on theological issues from fresh perspectives. Postliberal currents, by which I mean any approach questioning and abandoning the liberal, historicist reductionism, aim at a completely new treatment of biblical theology. In this respect, Räisänen represents the *modern* and even his more recent hermeneutical innovations build on historicist views. But, his historical and philosophical commitments are no longer generally accepted in the scholarly community. Instead, many scholars avoid his views because of his aggressive treatment of theological themes and Christian doctrines. As we shall later see (in 9.4.) younger scholars and also some postmodern theologians have drifted into conflict with Räisänen's approach. The reason for this is understandable. Räisänen represents secularized a/theology in its purest possible form.

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<sup>83</sup> Vanhoozer's theory has aroused immense discussion among scholars both in systematic theology and biblical scholarship; see Vanhoozer, *Drama*. For a general introduction to the "postliberal" radical orthodoxy, see Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*. For the discussion between biblical studies and dogmatics, see Thiselton, *Hermeneutics of Doctrine*; and Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics*.



## CHAPTER NINE

### FROM QURAN CRITICISM TO SOCIOLOGICAL REDUCTIONISM

The final task in this investigation is to explore the general principles and metanarratives that work behind Räisänen's hermeneutical theory. This task is not an easy one and, at some points, it is open to speculation. Nevertheless, Räisänen has written so extensively on his hermeneutical premises, as well as world view, that the task is not impossible. He has provided much material on which the basic structure of his thinking can be analyzed. As the previous chapters have shown, Räisänen's main ideas revolve around the interpretation of religion as such, as well as Weberian sociology with the help of which he has wanted to explain the dynamics of the alleged "chain of interpretation."

#### 9.1. *Reinterpreting Reimarus: The Essence of Religion*

Working as a New Testament scholar, Räisänen has all his life attempted to explain religion. His early studies both in the area of science of religion and New Testament investigation show that he has attempted to solve the problems concerning the genesis and dynamics of religion as such. Accordingly, the investigation of New Testament theology for Räisänen, has been a Wredean project of investigating religion instead of a corpus of certain canonical writings. The question we must pose in the last phase of this study is simply the following: What is religion for Räisänen?

There are several different components in Räisänen's hermeneutics that explain his views. The first of the major themes in Räisänen's hermeneutical thinking concerns his view on the Quran. This, of course, also affects his essential views both on the Bible and religion in general. The great significance of Quran-studies in his investigations has, in the present analysis, proved to be a somewhat surprising feature. This is a subject that seldom comes up in New Testament criticism. Investigating Räisänen's early books we have found an empathy with Reimarus' interpretation. He has adopted the latter's crucial principle: the Bible must be read like any other piece of literature. The consequences have been immense. When the Bible is read like the Quran, all traditional readings of the New Testament must change. A completely new theory of interpretation can be built on principles similar to those that Reimarus once introduced.

Our analysis of this issue has been based on Räisänen's four essential writings that explicate his early thinking and the development of his hermeneutics.<sup>1</sup> In sum, they include *Das koranische Jesusbild*, and *The Idea of Divine Hardening*, his programmatic article *Authority*, and the later article "Uskontotiede ja eksegetiikka" [Science of Religion and Exegetics] where he presents the central ideas from his unpublished manuscript on the relation between the methodology of science of religion and biblical studies. These writings, even the essential content the last one, come from the period 1971–1972.

The study confirms what Räisänen himself has often said in public: his hermeneutical theory is dependent on his early works. And, what is as important as it is interesting, Räisänen's hermeneutics of the chain of interpretation has been constructed on the basis of his Quran studies. He writes in several places that the comparison between Muhammad and Paul opened his eyes to see that any fundamental theological contemplation is dependent on a reinterpretation of one's own religious tradition. As personal situations and the status quo of everyday life change, this experience allows people to find new solutions for difficult problems. And since all this takes place in a religious community, these contemplations are expressed in theological language. In a rather recent article Räisänen describes his findings as follows:

Subsequently, it was the reading of the Qur'an with an analogous redaction-critical approach that helped me to appreciate that alien scripture. Redaction criticism is often looked down upon as old-fashioned, but of course it never consisted of the separation of redaction from tradition only; redaction criticism taught me to view the Qur'an as a theological whole rather than to just trace its components to this or that source (which was then fashionable in critical studies of the Qur'an).<sup>2</sup>

In his hermeneutics Räisänen focuses on crises. In *Divine Hardening* he investigates how Muhammad started to use hard predestinarian language after having met with "bitter resistance" in his community. Paul, in turn, felt that he stood on at turning point since most of the Jews of his time, God's own people, did not accept Jesus as their Messiah. Therefore Paul, in his soteriology, attempted to solve the "discrepancy" between theology and reality—and ended up using predestinarian language. For Räisänen, it is not exactly experience as a personal feeling that generates theological

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<sup>1</sup> These writings are mentioned here merely for convenience's sake; for the analysis, see 1.1. and 1.5.

<sup>2</sup> Räisänen, *Challenges*, 300.

renovations. He means that people experience difficult situations and try to adapt their lives so that they can manage in the future.<sup>3</sup>

We have noted that even though the concept of experience is crucial for Räisänen, it also creates problems for his theory. Experiencing crisis in one's life differs essentially from positive religious experience. Furthermore, problems in the community are but a small part of community life. This theory cannot explain—even in terms of the hermeneutical pattern itself—how positive conceptions of Christology or soteriology could be constructed with the help of sociological principles alone. Religion, in Räisänen's opinion, is not a very happy matter. Moreover, in the Finnish discussion Räisänen has had to face criticism of his ideas claiming that religious experience usually has to do with the noumena. Since Räisänen rejects this view, he drifts into problems. He ends up dealing with religious phenomena in a completely immanent field.

But this is not the only problem in the discussion about experience. Almost all standard traditional themes in theology stand outside Räisänen's horizon in hermeneutics. How, for instance, could the Davidic messiahship of the Nazarean be explained as a result of some personal experience in the community? Or what kind of sociological tension would a religious Jew undergo in order to describe Jesus as an eternal High Priest in the heavenly *debir*? What about justification by faith? Or the struggle between flesh and spirit? Theology, as such, cannot be reduced to sociological functions—but Räisänen attempts it.

Reductionism, then, is the danger that Räisänen faces in his interpretation, and he admits the difficulty while treating the problem in his *Beyond*. His argumentation is twofold. On the one hand, he refers to the essential diversity of New Testament theology. On the other hand, he relies on his history-of-religion methodology where the propositions of all religions are treated in the same way.<sup>4</sup>

The actual pluralism of the religious traditions forces a scholar concerned with truth-questions to a certain kind of reductionism: he is bound to reduce the often absolute claims found in his sources to a more relative size, if for no other reason than that he has to relate them to claims found in *other* sources (unless he is content with simply reproducing the rival claims).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See especially Räisänen, *Divine Hardening*, 96.

<sup>4</sup> Balla remarks that diversity is the crucial argument on which Räisänen relies when questioning the possibility of actual New Testament theology. Balla, *NDBT* (2000) 24.

<sup>5</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 135–136.

Analogies from Quran-studies appear also here. According to Räsänen, two different religions cannot justifiably claim for exclusive revelation at the same time: "For instance, it is impossible to accept *simultaneously* on an objective level both the claims made by New Testament writers about Jesus and the claims made in the Qur'an about the revelation received by Muhammad."<sup>6</sup> The notion seems simple enough, but it implies a difficult theoretical problem. If revelation, from a scientific point of view, is impossible, then religious statements must be considered merely human thoughts. So we are back to the problem with which Räsänen began the above-mentioned speculation over reductionism: "Is it not 'reductionist' (and, so the argument runs, wrong) to speak of what is referred to as revelation and as acts of God in the sources as human experiences and interpretations?"<sup>7</sup> Even though Räsänen superficially denies the attitude, his writings answer: yes.

Therefore, all this means that the basic approach in Räsänen's studies, from the very start, is one of sociology. This is why, in his 1997 article (depending on the analyses of the unpublished manuscript before that), he states that the methodology for investigating the Bible must not essentially differ from that of science of religion. The scholar's task is to try to explain how human beings produce religious statements. This is a scholarly analysis that has nothing to do with concepts like divine revelation or the Bible's authority.<sup>8</sup>

It is easy to understand why Räsänen still needs the concept of myth. When interpreting either the Quran or the New Testament he is not at all interested in theological statements. As noted, these can never be treated through sociological methods. And scholars in Räsänen's new tradition are not even supposed to try that. Part of the (Finnish) science-of-religion approach includes the myth-theory of the German history-of-religion school from the nineteenth century that provides a perfect evaluation of biblical statements. Since biblical texts must be subjected to *Entmythologisierung*, a rational treatment of New Testament theology is outside the scope of the investigation even from the very beginning.

Sociology explains why Räsänen's hermeneutical theory of the chain of interpretation focuses primarily on the contradictions and crises that emerge gradually in the course of history. He focuses on conflicts. This is

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<sup>6</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, 136.

<sup>7</sup> Räsänen, *Beyond*, 135.

<sup>8</sup> See also Räsänen, *Challenges*, 219–223.

why later, in his *Rise*, Räisänen attempts to detect all the possible conflicts he can find in early Christianity. He is interested in seeing how some opinions are condemned as heresy, and he attempts to do justice to groups that taught otherwise than the patriarchal Church lead by conservative apostles.

Furthermore, Quran-studies directly and plainly produced the hermeneutical triad Räisänen uses throughout his career until his final monograph, the *Rise*. Even though our analysis has shown that Räisänen was undoubtedly helped by Langdon Gilkey's emphasis on experience, the pattern for interpretation is justified by his Quran-studies. Räisänen himself states this in his above-mentioned article: "This triad of tradition, experience and (new) interpretation is my primary suggestion for a pattern of interpreting early Christian religion."<sup>9</sup> The results of the early work of young Räisänen are then summarized in his *Authority*, where he explicates his hermeneutical pattern in detail.

After Reimarus, Räisänen is the first scholar in the West to put much weight on Quran-criticism when developing biblical hermeneutics. Even though his interest in the Quran did not grow from the same root that Reimarus so enthusiastically exploited, Räisänen's final interpretation theory bears several similar features to that of his famous predecessor. In his reading, Räisänen makes a comparison between Muhammad's, Jesus', and Paul's religious experience and their ways of expressing it. This is how he constructs the founding principles for the hermeneutical theory of a "chain of interpretation."

There is a sincere aspiration behind Räisänen's principle of *fair play* in historical research. He no doubt does attempt an impartial approach to the different religious texts he deals with. This is why both the Quran and the Bible are subjected to similar historical-critical investigation. Räisänen has attempted to get the two religions behind these writings into an open dialogue. But just as Stichele has remarked, there is an ethical problem with this kind of approach: "it takes two to dialogue." The problem as Stichele sees it, concerns the conditions on which the alleged dialogue is supposed to take place.

The major problem I see is that the others are in fact expected to *learn our language* first in order to make such a dialogue possible. If they adopt *our* methodology in approaching their Scripture, we can then converse. The problem is that we thus end up prescribing the rules of the "game" in which

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<sup>9</sup> Räisänen, *TAik* 102 (1997) 122.

fair play is to be practiced and one-sidedly impose our norms on those with whom we want to communicate.<sup>10</sup>

Fair play, in this light, is not that fair. There is always the danger that scholars impose their own values on the dialogue. In this discussion, post-modern theologians probably mean to refer to the contemporary understanding of dialogue rather than one concerning sources but, this also means the reading of other religions. Räisänen, however, reiterates the importance of the historical-critical reading also for the Quran. There is a good reason for this, too, in his theory. As we have argued in the previous chapters, Räisänen, depending on Weberian hermeneutics, is convinced that there is but one proper way to understand the essence of religion. For the positivist mind, religion is only a metaphysical way of treating issues that in fact have a merely sociological character. Considering Räisänen's hermeneutics, though, this is a complex question, and we shall return to it in another subchapter below.

In this study we have argued that the entire genesis of the historical-critical approach to the Bible is the product of early Quran-criticism. Similar principles have been applied in both of these fields. Furthermore, we have seen that Räisänen himself uses the principles that can be found in Riccoldo or Reimarus. He even applies them in one and the same article both to the Bible and the Quran. The principles, focusing on discrepancies, lies, and moral problems had been created in order to show that the Quran was not the word of God—and the very same discourse was then used in biblical criticism. Therefore, it is interesting to find that Räisänen even towards the end of his career refers to such principles as he comments on the birth of historical investigation of the Bible.

It was the perception of moral problems and theological differences in the Bible that generated biblical criticism, rather than an imitation of "secular" history, not to speak of an imitation of the natural sciences.<sup>11</sup>

Original Christianity as a religion, for Räisänen, is thus something completely different from the doctrinal Christianity that prevailed in the West and gradually turned into early Catholicism. The parallel with Harnack is

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<sup>10</sup> Stichele, *Moving Beyond*, 316. Stell goes even further and criticizes those clinging to the old paradigm for reserving scientific truth for themselves: "Rather than acknowledging their own contextual location, biblical scholars have assumed that their values and commitments, to objectivity and neutrality, for example, are somehow the norm, and that anyone else's values represent a distortion of that norm." Stell, *Moving Beyond*, 82.

<sup>11</sup> Räisänen, *Challenges*, 299.

so striking that it needs to be discussed in more detail later.<sup>12</sup> One could even state that there is an sympathy with the historical-critical criteria for discerning the authentic words of Jesus here—but here just pursuing the authentic form of early Christianity. According to the criterion of dissimilarity, original belief must differ both from Second Temple Judaism and post-Easter apostolic Christianity. Räisänen's reconstruction of an enthusiastic mystery religion fulfills the criteria. It no longer has much to do with Jewish faith. In many cases it openly fights with Judaism and presents a perverted picture of it. And it certainly is distanced from what—according to Räisänen—was about to come: it has nothing to do with the “profound intolerance” that the “armies of monks” have produced in the dogmatic orthodox church.<sup>13</sup>

There are two special features in Räisänen's theory. First of all, in his opinion, original Christianity has little to do with the New Testament. Even though Räisänen investigates different writings minutely and has always focused on the exegetical analysis of the texts, the nature of the original Christian faith cannot be found in the writings themselves. Räisänen must have another methodology to help construct the religion—as Wrede put it—behind literary documents. Räisänen has shown interest in the psychopathology of religious thought and, in practice, he constantly attempts to find a different reality behind the texts—and even against the assurances of the text itself. Like Bultmann, Räisänen believes that reality lies *hidden* behind the text and only skilled scholars are able to disclose it by their methods. There is an open discrepancy between canonical texts and truth, the historical truth of the nature of religion.<sup>14</sup>

The second problem concerns Räisänen's hermeneutical theory. His approach is not really consistent with what he has stated in his theory before. There is no chain of interpretation here. One cannot find any sympathetic reinterpretation of previous tradition. Instead, Räisänen's

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<sup>12</sup> It is in fact surprising that Räisänen in his *Neutestamentliche Theologie?* criticizes the “transcendentalists” for trying to make sense of the very nature of religion (“suchen nach dem ‘Wesen der Religion,’ ähnlich wie manche Exegeten nach der Sache’ der biblischen Texte aus sind”), even though his own “empiricist” hermeneutical theory is based on a very strictly defined view on the nature of religion. Räisänen, *Neutestamentliche Theologie?*, 69.

<sup>13</sup> Räisänen, *Rise*, 226; quoted at length above in 8.5.

<sup>14</sup> This feature becomes a constitutive element in Räisänen's hermeneutics, see 9.5. below. Hahn has noted that this is in fact part of Räisänen's theory. In his German book *Neutestamentliche Theologie?* Räisänen states that his history-of-religion approach does not focus on texts as they stand but behind the texts: “*nicht* aus einem Studium der Texte *als* Texte besteht, sondern *hinter* die Texte blicke möchte.” Räisänen, *Neutestamentliche Theologie?*, 85. See Hahn, *Studien I*, 153.



explanation is based, as he openly says, on crises and contradictions. This too corresponds with the criterion of dissimilarity. In his theory the development of religious thought is not based on the flow of tradition. It is based on the idea of a complete breaking off of relations and renouncing the previous tradition. According to Räsänen, there is a fundamental incompatibility between Jewish religion and early Christianity on the one hand, and between the original Christian mythical gnostic religion and later Christian orthodoxy on the other hand.

This, however, is not yet the final answer when attempting to explain Räsänen's hermeneutical theory. Instead, these kinds of results raise new questions. What can explain Räsänen's view that ancient biblical statements are necessarily false? How can he be certain that particular theological statements have no value? The hypothesis is that there is an influential metanarrative working behind Räsänen's own theology, and it grows out of the rationalist tradition of Western scholarship.

### *9.2. Significance of the Weberian Metanarrative*

When attempting to detect Räsänen's fundamental hermeneutical principles we can proceed by asking, why does the concept of myth have permanent value in his theory? Why does he keep rejecting biblical propositions as mere innovations of the ecstatic minds of the first Christians? One of the most plausible answers is that Räsänen's hermeneutics depend on the general developments of European cultural history. In chapters 2 and 3 above, we have suggested that his attitude towards religion in general is analogical to the evolutionary pattern of secularization that Comte and Weber, independently but in an almost identical way, proposed. My claim here is that such a hermeneutical view has influenced the thoughts of numerous theologians even though they would never directly refer to the great creators of positivism. This is something scholars adopt from culture in general and something that is implied in the definitions of philosophy of science in several different departments.

The analysis of the secularization of western culture itself, as we have noted in this investigation, has led John Milbank and the British Radical Orthodoxy movement into the field of sociology. These scholars have explained the genesis of secularized theology by referring to Comte and Weber's pattern of cultural evolution, an influential metanarrative that speaks of three different millennial phases of culture. These may be reconstructed here as follows:

magical (theological)—salvation-religions (metaphysical)—secular modern (positivist)

Comte, as a positivist, interpreted the metaphysical phase merely as a continuation of the magical ideology relying on mythical thinking, and Weber adopted the same view.<sup>15</sup> It is typical of positivist science that the world view of the natural sciences governs all hermeneutical conceptions. This is precisely the issue that Milbank has studied.<sup>16</sup>

This view became later the basic point of departure for the whole Radical Orthodoxy movement. Many of its analyses focused on secularization, and the emergence of post-Christian ideology was investigated from several different points of view. This can also be seen in the opening words of the programmatic book *Radical Orthodoxy* from 1999: “For several centuries now, secularism has been defining and constructing the world. It is a world in which the theological is either discredited or turned into a harmless leisure-time activity of private commitment.”<sup>17</sup>

According to these commentators, thus, the attitude of positivist scholars—and those writing theology such as Troeltsch—is directed by an evolutionary pattern. For them, the mythical was never real. For Weber, “primitive man” was basically a rationalist. This is why Milbank remarks that, for positivist thought, “the primitive age was ‘proto-scientific’, and in other respects also it foreshadowed modernity.” Hence the new soteriology. The development of rational thought means an “always-coming-to-be” of liberal Protestantism as well as secularism. This is a perfect deductionist conclusion. For Weberian thought, there is no room for alternatives.<sup>18</sup>

Along with Troeltsch’s ideas, then, we move to the field of New Testament studies and the *Historismus* that affected Räsänen’s hermeneutics in the early phase. Not only Reimarus in his Deistic enthusiasm and Strauss with his project against the supranatural, but Troeltsch as well believed in the evolutionary development of Western culture. The “naive world,” as

<sup>15</sup> Similar phases can be found in the ideologies of several philosophers. Kant’s idealist view of religion belongs to these since, in his vision, metaphysical religions will be gradually replaced by an ethical, universal religion the ideology of which is secular. See Kant’s *Religion*, 105–116. Moreover, I have pointed out elsewhere that Gianbattista Vico had already presented a pattern of this kind concerning cultural evolution where the age of religions must give way to the age of reason. See Vico, *The First New Science*, 40–43, 66, 152–153.

<sup>16</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 92; see the analysis in 3.1.

<sup>17</sup> Milbank et al., *Radical Orthodoxy*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> See 3.1. above. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 93.

Troeltsch says, has turned into a scientific one.<sup>19</sup> As the Bible is studied in this new situation, its only possible, justified and scientific approach is based on the principle of causality.<sup>20</sup>

According to Weberian hermeneutics, thus, we live in a closed materialist world. Human beings can have no knowledge about the transcendent, and many scholars state that metaphysics must be excluded as a useless projection. Such a view provides a powerful tool that enables positivist theologians present their claims with extraordinary certainty. If ancient documents reflect the ancient mythical thought world, their only rational interpretation follows along the lines of the evolutionary pattern. In our analysis this was clearly seen in Bultmann's treatment of myths, and Räisänen shares these views in all of his writings including the last monograph, the *Rise*.

Furthermore, this is the hermeneutical approach Gilkey promoted in his article that influenced Räisänen's *Authority*. As we saw earlier, Gilkey's whole train of thought was based on the idea that the liberal reading based on modern cosmology has changed the parameters of hermeneutics. Since orthodox theology and neo-orthodox theology, according to Gilkey, still cling to traditional theological vocabulary, they cannot interpret the divine message for the present generation. Furthermore, they are paradoxically dependent on modern cosmology in their reading of more general passages in the Scriptures: "they have not repudiated the liberal insistence on the causal continuum of space-time experience." Gilkey directs his severe criticism towards scholarly interpretation beyond the conservative evangelical tradition. Even university theology has not found solutions to important hermeneutical problems.

The causal nexus in space and time which Enlightenment science and philosophy introduced into the Western mind and which was assumed by liberalism is also assumed by modern theologians and scholars; since they

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<sup>19</sup> Troeltsch, *Absolutheit*, 105. See the analysis in 2.1.

<sup>20</sup> Adam sees these arguments as the basis for an "intrinsically modern" hermeneutics: "In short, Räisänen and Harvey argue that, whereas in the past readers undertook theological interpretations on the assumption that their own interests were adequately shared with the New Testament texts, *now* scholars must turn their back on this tradition of biblical theology, must recognize the temporal abyss that separates the contemporary interpreter from the ancient text, and must respect the specialization of knowledge that authorizes one scholar legitimately to speak about early Christian religious thought and another to speak about the ways contemporary people can appropriate such insights as can be salvaged from early Christianity." Adam, *Making Sense*, 105.

participate in the modern world of science both intellectually and existentially, they can scarcely do anything else.<sup>21</sup>

For Gilkey, then, Enlightenment science is a necessary factor in Western biblical scholarship. Since scholars cannot escape it, they are doomed to live in two different worlds at the same time. They must adopt two contradictory concepts of truth. Everyone must accept modern cosmology and positivist causality. Theology is possible only in terms of the principles Troeltsch so diligently expressed in his theory. This, really, means the “always-coming-to-be” of liberal Protestantism in biblical hermeneutics, and Räisänen has accepted the view from his earliest writings.

The claim that Räisänen’s hermeneutics are dependent on the Weberian pattern is so crucial that it is not sufficient to attempt its justification merely on a general level. Therefore, it is necessary to point out several different aspects that all prove the case when taken together.

- (1) Räisänen has adopted positivist epistemology. His world view corresponds to that shared by Comte and Weber. He started as an inductivist, as he openly says in his earlier writings. His later publications prove that he has never essentially changed his view on positivist empiricism. There is no revelation. All biblical statements must be seen as human interpretations. In an epistemological sense, heaven is closed.<sup>22</sup>
- (2) To be precise, Räisänen rejects metaphysics. In this respect he belongs to the positivist tradition especially on epistemological grounds. During the analysis we have found several examples of this. In addition to *Entmythologisierung* Räisänen demands *Entkerygmatisierung*. Any divine inspiration behind the biblical text—or any religious text for that matter—is unthinkable.<sup>23</sup>
- (3) One practical example of the scientific view is historicism. As we saw in chapter 2, Räisänen has presented his readers with detailed descriptions of how history must be studied. All his examples betray his belief in the power of Rankean historical explanation. One can admit that, over the years, he has grown more cautious in making such statements. Nevertheless, he constantly speaks of the “high level” of certainty in the results of historical-critical investigation. At the

<sup>21</sup> Gilkey, *JR* 41 (1961) 195.

<sup>22</sup> See Räisänen, *Raamattunäkemyistä etsimässä*, 12–14.

<sup>23</sup> This was the main conclusion in Räisänen’s *Authority*, see analysis in chapter 2.2.

same time the basic structure of his hermeneutical theory has never changed.<sup>24</sup>

- (4) Weberian reductionism is clearly detectable in Räsänen's conception of religion. His hermeneutical theory of the chain of interpretation is based on the idea that all religions are systems of mythological innovation. They are mental structures that are completely human constructions. Therefore, their true nature can be revealed by careful analysis, like the one Räsänen made in his *The Idea of Divine Hardening*. He has never doubted the validity of the reduction he makes.<sup>25</sup>
- (5) The latter point can be developed further. As Räsänen also considers biblical theology mythical, he agrees with Fritz Buri's claim that holding on to the *kerygma* is just an indication of belief in mythology. For Räsänen, mythology represents the theological and, at best, metaphysical interpretation of reality mentioned in Weber's theory. This is why theological presentation and theological propositions can never have (scientific) truth value.<sup>26</sup>
- (6) The sociological approach prevails in Räsänen's theory. Even in 1972 his theory of interpretation was based on sociological premises. His later developments in the area of the sociology of knowledge go so far as to treat ideologies from a sociological point of view. This means reducing mental activities to social phenomena.
- (7) The outcome of Räsänen's hermeneutics is secular. He applies materialist values in his interpretation. Räsänen treats New Testament Christology and soteriology as false interpretations of personal experiences. These mythical expressions must not have a permanent role in the Christian Church. Instead, true faith must correspond with the hermeneutical theory: it must be secular in the sense that it no longer dismisses any particular thoughts as heresy. Furthermore, it is secular in content. The basic content of valid Christian tradition is ethical. It comprises love and fidelity, as well as all kinds of life preserving values.<sup>27</sup>
- (8) So for Räsänen the true development both of Western culture and Protestant theology is a movement towards open liberalism. This last argument makes the case. Even though the above-mentioned issues

<sup>24</sup> Suffice it here to refer to the results in chapter 2.1.

<sup>25</sup> The analysis on the importance of Räsänen's *The Idea of Divine Hardening* was provided in chapter 2.3.

<sup>26</sup> Räsänen discusses Buri's ideas already in his *Authority*.

<sup>27</sup> See especially chapter 5.5.

are important details in the Weberian project, the idea of development is necessary for the final theory. Räsänen has been quite open in writing that liberal Protestantism in its utmost post-Bultmannian version is the most acceptable form of Christianity. Why is there no positive, constructive development in the history of theology? Why are essential doctrines, such as total corruption, *satisfactio vicaria*, or bodily resurrection to be held false? Räsänen's "chain" of interpretation is evolutionary. He believes that religious thought gradually develops into mature rationalism. His hermeneutics are dependent on Comtean/Weberian values and, therefore, biblical doctrines cannot be valid. They represent magical or mythical ideas.

Räsänen makes these ideas explicit in his writings. When writing on religions, truth and the future, in one of his articles written in Finnish, Räsänen criticizes biblical fanaticism (as well as that of Islam) and supports "enlightened religious thinking" that opposes polemics and violence. "*The fate of the enlightened view is crucial for the destiny of humankind.*"<sup>28</sup> Räsänen believes that the entire destiny of humanity depends on how churches and societies adopt the "enlightened" liberal view on religion. For him, it is the highest expression of human reason and the climax of Western culture. Following this same line, Räsänen also proclaims the necessary development of liberal Protestantism. True interpretation has been on its way for centuries. Now that it has arrived, it has keys for the historical salvation of the world. If only religions would withdraw the barricades and cease to demand strictly defined doctrines, they could learn to live in peace. Räsänen suggests a new vision of religions that do understand their own tradition but no longer exalt it "as the only possible solution" for salvation.<sup>29</sup>

This view is in line with Räsänen's liberal universalism which we have given due attention during this analysis. His works are replete with universalist features even before the *Rise*. Räsänen opposes credal Christianity and demands freedom of spirit. His view of human dignity is far from Pauline anthropology. Furthermore, his own contribution follows the

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<sup>28</sup> Räsänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 94; my italics. In his *Beyond* Räsänen, quoting Lindbeck, applies this idea to a wider view concerning Western history: "Obviously, we are on our way into 'a culturally (even if not statistically) post-Christian period.'" Räsänen, *Beyond 2nd ed.*, 157.

<sup>29</sup> Other scholars have noted that Räsänen is enthusiastic about the possibilities of the liberal future, see for instance Stenström, *Moving Beyond*, 107.

values Unitarian Universalists have made popular in the United States. The most important feature concerns Universalism itself, though. Räsänen believes in the Universalist doctrine of equality of religions. He replaces traditional eschatology with a Kantian ideal of a peaceful coexistence of religions.

In fact Räsänen's very definition of hermeneutics is based on the idea of cultural and theological development. As we noted already in the introduction and then later in chapter 2, Räsänen suggests a threefold pattern for the development of biblical hermeneutics. A fundamentalist, literal view, that was still based on verbal inspiration, was later displaced by salvation historical hermeneutics. These two must both step aside, however, as the final, mature historical reading has now revealed the true nature of the Bible. Strict historical-critical investigation leaves room only for non-literal interpretations.<sup>30</sup>

This trichotomy corresponds surprisingly well with the Weberian (and Comtean) triad. The old dogmatic and fundamentalist reading is held to be mystical or magical just as Bultmann and the history-of-religion school had stated. Salvation historical interpretation is still metaphysical, even though the mystical part is no longer considered significant. The final "secular modern," non-literal reading is that of the historical-critical investigation. And as Räsänen says in his normative rhetoric, it is the only approach that can be "taken seriously." It is the climax of Western culture, the "positive" truth that, once found, dictates every true reading of the Bible. Weberian evolutionism can thus be found in the heart of Räsänen's definition of hermeneutics:

magical (theological)—salvation-religions (metaphysical)—secular modern (positivist)  
*fundamentalist (dogmatic)—salvation historical—historical-critical (non-literal)*

Analysis in this study has shown that, for Räsänen, the basic justification for such a pattern is in historicism that is based on inductivism. His own non-literal interpretation of the Bible builds directly on positivist knowledge. The reason for abandoning both the literal and dogmatic view on

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<sup>30</sup> See subchapter 2.1. It may be surprising for some readers that Räsänen actually speaks of general views rather than hermeneutics here, but the reason for this is simple. As we saw already in the introduction, Räsänen usually calls only contemporary homiletical application "interpretation." It is necessary to treat these views here as hermeneutical because in scholarly literature this is where they actually belong.



the one hand, and salvation historical interpretation on the other hand, has been the same as for Comte and Weber. The magical/mythological and metaphysical understanding of both religion and the Bible have been wrong. A completely new approach must be adopted. To use an old expression, with his hermeneutics Räsänen cherishes the Enlightenment's triumph over superstition.

Due to this point of departure Räsänen has later had problems when encountering phenomenological theories. Nevertheless Räsänen, during his career, has had several different contacts with the continental tradition. Berger's sociology of knowledge—deriving essentially from the phenomenological current—is important for him, but his interpretation of Berger's phenomenological theory turns out to be reductionistic. Räsänen also has problems with Theissen's semiotics, because it does not fit his views about language and reality. And finally, the discussion with post-modern currents has ended in open conflict, as we shall see below.

Over the years Räsänen has changed his terminology. Even though human beings, for him, are “empirical animals,” they can no longer be considered as mere “blank slates” (*tabula rasa*) on which experiences gradually write new information and knowledge.<sup>31</sup> Every human being “is born into a particular community that has its own tradition.” In this way people “inherit” conceptions about the nature of the world. For Räsänen, this is the basic starting point that sociology of knowledge uses as it speaks about the community's symbolic world.<sup>32</sup>

The sociology of knowledge makes Räsänen go even further. He says: “Experiences [probably the German word “*Erlebnis*” is meant here] are not pure phenomena but always already *interpreted* experiences. The experiences themselves imply given and interpretative materials (but its nature is not easy to observe).”<sup>33</sup> Räsänen must mean the religious experiences that he is investigating. The *interpreted* experiences that are expressed by the symbols of the symbolic world are already directed by the tradition in their context. Räsänen states that New Testament symbols are directed by the Jewish-Christian tradition that moulded the thought world of the first Christians. This is not standard epistemology, though. Räsänen has

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<sup>31</sup> This is an interesting attempt to proceed from inductivism to hermeneutical epistemology, but one has to note that Räsänen does not actually mean empirical knowledge here. Observations, for him, remain pure and the “high degree of objectivity” still prevails.

<sup>32</sup> Räsänen, *TA* 92 (1987) 382; *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 22–23. Räsänen no longer makes a distinction between sensory data and reasoning.

<sup>33</sup> Räsänen, *TA* 92 (1987) 382; cf. *Tuhat ja yksi tulkintaa*, 23.

tried to unite two contradictory theories: that of inductivism and that of phenomenology. Furthermore, he states that “experiences” are interpreted phenomena. They have meaning when they are taken on the verbal level. They are not mere words, as Derrida would say, but concepts. They are symbols, especially religious symbols.<sup>34</sup>

The theoretical problem with this kind of reasoning is the same as we have noted when discussing language: Räsänen does not mean that “knowledge” as such would depend on tradition or ideology. He has not really moved to phenomenology, he just exploits some of its terminology. As in his treatment of theological language, here too Räsänen implies that “interpreted experience” concerns only religious experience. He would not agree, for instance, with the claim that a scholar performing demythologization is also directed by his materialist world view. Up to his last writings Räsänen is convinced that the results of historical-critical work are not influenced by any kind of ideology or world view. Instead, he assumes that they are just results of rather presuppositionless, disinterested investigation, one that necessarily ends up with its indisputable conclusions. In a sense, he states that reality keeps on writing its information on the famous *tabula* despite all the theoretical byways it has taken when encountering new ideas.<sup>35</sup>

Such difficulties considered, it seems apparent that Räsänen’s non-literal interpretation builds essentially on the idea of positivist historical-critical knowledge. He holds that theology is directed by experience, and experience is always interpreted experience. Tradition, the mundane mythical description of divine things, controls the world view and symbolic world of the first Christians. Räsänen himself calls the investigation of this kind of process the sociology of knowledge but, as we have noted in the present study, it is closer to Bultmann’s *Entmythologisierung*. Theological statements of the Bible, which Räsänen calls the symbolic world of different writers, are considered human innovations that reflect the mythological world view and tradition in the middle of which the writers live.

Therefore, to understand religion correctly, Räsänen states, means to explain the genesis of religious thought with the help of historical-critical

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<sup>34</sup> It is not easy to see what Räsänen actually means here. For him experience means most of all experience of events such as crises (see 2.4.), not inner feelings. In this respect the distinction between phenomena and experiences is quite irrelevant for his hermeneutical theory. His version of phenomenology may be just a tool to help make tradition part of the process.

<sup>35</sup> This is how for instance Stegemann sees the nature of Räsänen’s historical approach, Stegemann, *Moving Beyond*, 223–225.

investigation. To be precise, in the light of our analysis Räsänen does not even mean that such historical work should be done with particular scientific methods that can be found for instance in Zimmermann's book. His own work on Paul has little to do with standard German methods, and also the *Rise* works mostly on another level of reasoning. The "historical" reality that entails non-literal interpretation is the materialist world view of positivism in general. This is Weberian hermeneutics *par excellence*.

### 9.3. *Räsänen's Solution: Sacralized Culturalism*

As we have argued in the analysis before, Weber's sociology of religion influenced both Berger's and Räsänen's views on the nature of religion. In this tradition, religion can be investigated by focusing on the symbolic world people have created in the Jewish-Christian context—whatever that then may mean in Räsänen's theology. New Testament texts, for him, do not really turn out to conform to Judaism and moreover Christian thoughts do not appear to be based on any early tradition about the significance of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, for Räsänen as for Berger too, the early Christian symbolic world is a human construction. Therefore, the history of the early Christian religion had to be interpreted in terms of that symbolic world's development. In this respect, Räsänen's hermeneutical theory is a form of Weberian sociology of religion. It differs from that of Berger's in certain crucial points, especially in the role of original experience, but it belongs to the same current in cultural hermeneutics.

This is how we finally reach the most crucial of all the features that constitute Räsänen's theory. The main principle in his sociological hermeneutics concerning the chain of interpretation is that of *sacralized culturalism*. Religion is explained as a function of contemporary culture. First of all, culturalism can be defined by a few important features.

- (1) Culturalism usually means the idea that individuals are determined by their culture. In the case of the Weberian definition this means that religion as a mental structure is one of the factors that constitute human identity and human interpretation of reality.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Culturalism, even though a term from another discipline, describes the basic Weberian understanding of the function of religion well. The original idea is usually that, according to this theory, individuals are determined *completely* by their culture. I do not want to stress this detail but, instead, use the basic claim: religion as part of culture is, both for Weber and Räsänen, a significant factor in people's interpretation of reality.

- (2) Religion is turned into an ideology by making it a mental structure and calling it a mere symbolic world. Therefore, it can be treated like a human ideology. According to Räsänen, sociology explains the nature of religion. Religion is only a human construction.<sup>37</sup>
- (3) The ever-changing culture constantly creates new religious thoughts. As the symbolic world itself is held to be the system of religion, contemporary culture always has a religious function—no matter what the ideology. In this sense, in fact, culture itself provides a religious interpretation of reality.
- (4) On the basis of the Weberian metanarrative traditional theological interpretations are destined to vanish and be replaced by rationalist and positivist interpretations of reality.

This is one side of Räsänen's hermeneutical program. Secondly, such culturalism as a hermeneutical approach also has a "sacralized" nature. This aspect then has certain special features.

- (1) According to this theory, individuals are influenced or determined by their symbolic world, but there is more to it. In Berger's and Räsänen's version, sacralized culturalism means that society and religion have a reciprocal relationship: the society itself creates its symbolic world, and religion—as this kind of system—affects individual people.<sup>38</sup>
- (2) The main issue here is that, in sacralized culturalism, all new interpretations the society produces are seen as *religious* interpretations despite the fact that traditional religions or beliefs are compromised by new ideologies.<sup>39</sup>
- (3) According to Räsänen's Weberian theory, the contemporary revision is the only valid form of religion today. His solution provides the only alternative for religion to have a function in contemporary culture. Nevertheless, as Weber stated, religion does have a role even in the age of positivist ideology and in modern culture.

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<sup>37</sup> My analysis of the sacralized culturalism refers mainly to Räsänen's adoption of Berger's sociology of religion, see 5.2. above.

<sup>38</sup> This was Berger's most important claim: people are not simply products of the society but the society is also a product of people and their symbolic world.

<sup>39</sup> It should be emphasized that this is the main point in Räsänen's hermeneutics. This point explains why he can claim that new interpretations, whatever their nature, and new links in the "chain" in this respect, are always also religious interpretations: they are products of the symbolic world that constitutes religion in the first place. In a sense, Räsänen has substituted symbolic world for religion and even dogmatics. This, of course, implies that "religion," for Räsänen, is merely a function of contemporary culture.

- (4) As Räsänen has set out to present an explanation of religion as such, for him, there is no other religion but the sociological one. This means that when scholars attempt to make sense of the phenomenon of religion, including Christianity, they must see it as a process where the fundamentals of doctrinal faith have changed essentially over the centuries.
- (5) In this way, contemporary religion is distanced from historical religions. Even though several traditional institutional Churches with their confessional beliefs still exist today they, according to the theory, no longer represent religion in its purest form. They are like museums that arrange exhibitions of ancient ideas in their cathedrals. In the Weberian scheme, dogmatics has nothing to offer the present community.<sup>40</sup>
- (6) Such a point of departure creates a contradiction between contemporary readings and historical religions—not to mention the Bible. Due to the positivist metanarrative the latter must belong to a bypassed phase of interpretation. It builds on a mythical or theological interpretation of reality.
- (7) This shows that the ideas of sacralized culturalism are related to Kant's distinction between historical religion and universal religion. Kant claimed that historical religions will gradually be abandoned as the new religion based on pure reason alone takes over. Kant assumed that his conception of an ethical universal religion was both a perfect understanding of religion and a new theological point of departure for interpreting reality.<sup>41</sup> Räsänen differs from this only in that his hermeneutical system is basically immanent and he need not have a divine justification for the universal religion.

These are the reasons why Räsänen's hermeneutical theory can be best understood in terms of the Weberian metanarrative. His chain of interpretation is directed by an evolutionary pattern. Like Bultmann before

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<sup>40</sup> As Räsänen contrasts (the present) symbolic world with (ancient) doctrines—because for him they all are just expressions of the symbolic world in their own context—a contradiction between liberal theology and church doctrine is inevitable.

<sup>41</sup> Both of these thinkers believe that gradually, in the course of history, confessional churches must vanish, as humankind grows into full maturity (Räsänen, *Uuteen uskoon*, 92; Kant, *Religion*, 156–157). Räsänen, like Kant, even needs the concept of God to justify his universal ethics, and this may be because he is aware of the problem atheists have in their materialist attempts to justify their elevated values and universal ethics. It is consistent that, for liberal Protestantism, this is exactly what Christianity stands for in the first place.

him, he questions all mythological descriptions. There is no possibility for a “biblical theology” since the Bible is filled with irrational interpretations. Furthermore, the salvation historical interpretation is considered false. This, apparently, is the reason why Räsänen never writes constructive analyses on Christology, eschatology or soteriology—even though it would be possible considering the material he has available. In his Weberian hermeneutics Räsänen relies on historical reduction and is interested mainly in the critique of religion.<sup>42</sup>

The hermeneutic of sacralized culturalism results in the idea of constant change in religion or religious thought. This is why Räsänen joined Berger in the latter’s idea of a “heretical imperative.” The flow of theological thought results in heresy because, in the alleged new situations, interpretations inevitably confront the beliefs of the forefathers. All claims of orthodoxy, in this perspective, are just signs of a power struggle among the early communities of the enthusiastic “Jesus-movement,” whatever they may have been in Räsänen’s reconstruction. Despite his interest in sociology he never defines the groups he presupposes in his studies.

The investigation of Räsänen’s sacralized culturalism confirms the observation made earlier in this study. His explanation no longer represents the sociology of religion as such, but cultural history or history of ideas. Räsänen investigates changes in culture, not the development of theology. In the context of his sociological hermeneutics this may sound consistent but, as his history-of-religion approach is assessed, certain problems remain. As Räsänen focuses on the evolution of culture, he is destined to reject the very issue that should be in the focus of a true history-of-religion approach: the religious identity of the adherents of the particular religion, in this case early Christianity.

The analysis shows thus that there is a discrepancy between Wrede and Weber in Räsänen’s hermeneutics. Räsänen’s Wredean history-of-religion suggests that one should abandon New Testament theology and focus on independent groups and their religious identity. This should result in a synchronical explanation.<sup>43</sup> In order to reveal the “original” diversity of early Christian teaching one should investigate differing expressions of

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<sup>42</sup> We have already discussed this issue above. Räsänen does use the word “constructive” and he also discusses the possibilities of constructive work with the texts but, for him, this only means ideological criticism that is ready to change theological meanings. He often uses the German term “Sachkritik” in order to describe scholars’ right to criticize the doctrinal content of different New Testament writings.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Morgan who remarks in another kind of context but, nevertheless, writing on the theory of biblical interpretation that history is diachronic and sociology is synchronic.

religious experience. This, of course, is what Räisänen in his *Beyond* claims to be about. Räisänen's Weberian allegiance, however, makes him work diachronically. As he is destined to work on cultural evolution and the changes that mould the Christian symbolic world—which is now more or less a single unit—he is forced to return to New Testament theology and investigate the alleged development of particular theological themes. Sociology of knowledge takes over and Räisänen starts to investigate the development of theology by detecting disagreement, power struggles, and violent appropriation of previous views. This dichotomy explains the plan of Räisänen's *Rise*.

#### 9.4. *Colliding with the Postmodern*

The significance of the Weberian metanarrative for Räisänen's hermeneutics will be highlighted as his encounter with postmodern thought is assessed. In the collection *Reading the Bible in the Global Village*, introducing some of the papers read at the 1999 Society of Biblical Literature International Meeting in Helsinki, Räisänen defends his scholarly position in his article "Biblical Critics in the Global Village." The meeting, hosted by Räisänen himself, focused partly on new postmodern readings and their controversial position vis-a-vis standard historical-critical investigation of the Bible.<sup>44</sup>

Räisänen took the opportunity to make his opening plenary address a response to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's famous SBL presidential address from 1987, where Schüssler Fiorenza published a revolutionary statement about a complete paradigm shift in New Testament interpretation. Her presidential address "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," has also been reprinted as an appendix in the above-mentioned collection. The discussion has many problems. Even though Räisänen's aim is to find common ground for two quite different currents, Schüssler Fiorenza criticized also the organisation of the meeting on this very subject. She was glad that she was later asked to contribute to the publication by sending a written response to Räisänen's paper ("Defending

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Morgan-Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, 139–140. For the discussion on the matter, see Balla, *NDBT* (2000) 26.

<sup>44</sup> Räisänen's article in *Global Village*, pp. 9–28, is reprinted in Räisänen, *Challenges*, 283–306.



the Center, Trivializing the Margins”), but she criticized the exclusion of female scholars from the original discussion itself.<sup>45</sup>

The SBL collection as such is thus based on an opposition that is rather difficult to handle. What should one think about a paradigm shift? Räisänen goes to great lengths to find issues that could unite scholars that apparently now stand in opposition to each other. In his address Räisänen does not start directly with feminism, though, because the scope of the discussion is wider. He speaks first about the transformations that have taken place in the area of biblical hermeneutics in general. By quoting A. Race and F.F. Segovia, Räisänen comments on these changes:

It is commonplace knowledge that our world is becoming a “global village” which means that “the days of religious and cultural isolationism are at an end.” Globalization has even affected the world of biblical studies, which has undergone a “fundamental and radical shift.”<sup>46</sup>

Globalization is important but the radical shift in theology is not merely dependent on the awakening of the Third World. New approaches belong to the larger postmodern movement where contemporary readings contrast with the grand Western metanarratives according to which the Bible has more traditionally interpreted. This is probably why, in Räisänen’s speech, Schüssler Fiorenza’s feminist reading is given a primary role. Schüssler Fiorenza, in her reprinted article on ethical readings, emphasizes that a change must be made so that biblical scholarship “would constitute a responsible scholarly citizenship that could be a significant participant in the global discourse seeking justice and well-being for all.”<sup>47</sup>

This, of course, is something that Räisänen could easily agree with. Especially in his Finnish books he has written extensively on issues of social justice and human responsibility. But there is one problem. In several writings, and especially in those that he keeps quoting, new approaches accuse historical-critical investigation of the Bible of leading the whole understanding of Scripture astray. This is why, in the global village, everything must change.

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<sup>45</sup> The speech was originally a SBL presidential address from 1987, printed in JBL and reprinted in the new collection. For the original, see Schüssler Fiorenza, *JBL* 107 (1988) 3–17. In her response, published in *Global Village*, Schüssler Fiorenza says: “Moreover, although there were two responses to his lecture at this event by scholars whom he had extensively quoted, neither another feminist colleague nor I had been invited to respond. It seems that the prohibition *mulier taceat in ecclesia* continues to shape academic discourse, albeit it is no longer intended.” Schüssler Fiorenza, *Global Village*, 29.

<sup>46</sup> Räisänen, *Global Village*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Global Village*, 123.

New readings with their critical attitude are ubiquitous, and Räisänen has found some impressive examples for his address. One of the clearest voices comes from R.S. Sugirtharajah.

One of the vexing problems of biblical interpretation is how to make the interpretative trek from the biblical milieu to the present day. This problem is specifically the creation of the historical-critical methods. Historical criticism tends to introduce into the task of interpretation a division of labour between the exegete and the expositor, between the scholar and the preacher, and between biblical scholarship and theological enterprise. This is the *original sin of the historical-critical method*. It sees the historian's task as taking up facts and handing them over to the theologian, as if it is a relay race and the theologian's task is to complete the final lap.<sup>48</sup>

Schüssler Fiorenza, in the SBL presidential address that Räisänen grappled with in his SBL 1999 discussion, gives a pessimistic description of the dark history of historical-critical hermeneutics. In Räisänen's words: "Hostile descriptions of this mighty dinosaur abound. 'Scientific antiquarian' Western exegesis has subjected the Bible to 'abstract, individualized and "neutralized" reading,' characterized by positivism, empiricism, or 'radical detachment.'"<sup>49</sup> And Schüssler Fiorenza continues in her own article: "Just as history as an academic discipline sought in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to prove itself as an objective science in analogy to the natural sciences, so also did biblical studies."<sup>50</sup> An extensive description of the "original sin" follows.

The scientists' ethos of value-free detached inquiry insists that the biblical critic needs to stand outside the common circumstances of collective life and stresses the alien character of biblical materials. What makes biblical interpretations possible is radical detachment, emotional, intellectual, and political distanciation. Disinterested and dispassionate scholarship enables biblical critics to enter the minds and world history of historical people, to step out of their own time and to study history on its own terms, unencumbered by contemporary questions, values, and interests. Apolitical detachment, objective literalism, and scientific value-neutrality are the rhetorical postures that seem to be dominant in the positivistic paradigm of biblical scholarship. The decentering of this rhetoric of disinterestedness and presupposition-free exegesis seeks to recover the political context of biblical scholarship and its public responsibility.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Voices*, 436. My italics on the passage that Räisänen has quoted.

<sup>49</sup> Räisänen, *Global Village*, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Global Village*, 115.

<sup>51</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Global Village*, 115. For a similar critique, see Mary Ann Tolbert in: Tolbert, *Reading 2*, 355.

Räisänen's third opponent continues with a similar rhetoric. In his own treatment, Fernando Segovia accuses the historical-critical tradition for its dependence on the Enlightenment project. A lengthy quotation here will place Räisänen's short references in their original context better.

Thus, the long-standing project of the Enlightenment, as embodied in historical criticism and its emerging rivals, was ultimately being called into question, as were a number of attendant principles and notions: the character of biblical studies as *science* and the use of the *scientific* method; the *rational, disinterested* researcher; the notion of *progress*. In the process, historical criticism along with the new competing paradigms began to be analyzed (like the Enlightenment itself) in terms of perspective and contextualization, agenda and social location, inextricably tied as these were to the gender and origins of its practitioners—Western male clerics.<sup>52</sup>

The opposition is as hard and difficult as one could expect. New approaches are aggressive and no longer avoid conflict. This is probably the reason why this controversy has made Räisänen, at least on the level of rhetoric, withdraw from some of his earlier convictions. First he reacts to the direct attack in which he sees himself as a respondent:

I do not doubt that genuine experiences of liberation underlie the liberationist rhetoric. Yet it sounds like the preaching of converts who portray their own past as darkness. It reminds me, in a somewhat alarming way, of the denigration of Judaism by Christian exegetes in bygone days. Historical critics have been forced into the role of the Pharisees of Matthew 23.<sup>53</sup>

After this, however, Räisänen starts to elaborate on the problem itself. He states that, in reality, his historical-critical hermeneutics are working in the very same direction as those opposing him in the present debate. "I propose a counter-thesis: far from being an enemy, historical criticism at its best can, and should, be seen as an *ally* of the liberationist enterprise." There have been flaws, such as too much emphasis on theological ideas at the cost of their social context. This, however, should not lead to an abandoning of the historical-critical approach: "such shortcomings are not necessarily faults of the method." For Räisänen, it is always a matter of individual scholars: "They are faults of people who did not make the best use of the method."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Segovia, *Reading*, 6.

<sup>53</sup> Räisänen, *Global Village*, 11.

<sup>54</sup> Räisänen, *Global Village*, 11.

These are the reasons why, for Räisänen, the whole debate is actually a debate *inside* the historical-critical movement—not *outside* it.

Their errors have been criticized *within the same paradigm* by others, who have pleaded for social-scientific or *wirkungsgeschichtlich* points of view, or for fair religio-historical comparison. And if authoritarian hierarchies have loomed large, this may have more to do with local academic cultures than with the method itself.<sup>55</sup>

Nothing should be wrong with the method, then. Räisänen is not prepared to take part in the discussion concerning the theoretical problems of historical-critical methodology. This view is in line with what we have learned in chapters treating Räisänen's commitment to German approaches in general, and form criticism as well as redaction criticism in particular. In light of Räisänen's scholarly publications, it is clear that he both uses the results of his previous monographs in the more hermeneutical writings and also provides new historical-critical analyses elsewhere.<sup>56</sup> And, in addition to this, he never changes his hermeneutical pattern that itself is a product of a historical-critical program presented for instance in Räisänen's *Authority*. This is the first sign that Räisänen does not really believe in change. Accusations directed against the historical-critical method are not valid. The reason for this is probably that he assumes that, in practice, every scholar accepts the principles of historical criticism—if the method is understood and conducted correctly. What is new, however, is that he is ready to make concessions.

Such speculation leads finally to a surprising conclusion: "Historical-critical scholarship was never a monolith."<sup>57</sup> This is a defense that Räisänen shares with Barr. The reference is to Barr's critical discussion with the Jewish scholar Jon Levenson who claims that historical criticism is "disastrous for religion." Barr defends his position by stating that the historical-critical method has never aimed at a monopoly. "Biblical theology arose precisely in order to provide something *other than* the historical-critical approach. It would be more correct, for most biblical theologians, to say

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<sup>55</sup> Räisänen, *Global Village*, 11. As Räisänen poses his own fair play approach over against the "faults" of the historical-critical tradition he shows that the issue is quite personal for him.

<sup>56</sup> Even in a recent article on hermeneutics Räisänen says, through a quotation, that any interpretation made outside the historical-critical analysis is destined to fall into a "pre-scientific" approach. Räisänen, *Challenges*, 248.

<sup>57</sup> Räisänen, *Global Village*, 11.

that they worked with two different methods, the historical-critical and the biblical-theological: they certainly did not suppose that the former had a monopoly."<sup>58</sup> The heated discussion makes Räisänen follow Barr and leave room for a methodologically independent biblical theology. This is just the opposite of what Räisänen presented in his *Beyond New Testament Theology*. Previously he claimed that the basic problem is that, after the historical-critical analysis, there is no methodologically sound biblical theology whatsoever.

Elaborating on Barr's relevant thoughts a little bit more it is useful to note that, in his own treatment of the hermeneutics of biblical theology Barr—now opposing Childs—emphasizes that the accusation of false objectivism is wrong. This could also be directed against the second of Schüssler Fiorenza's points.

It has often been argued that attempts at "objective" work involved the illusion of standing outside the stream of time and producing a result wholly independent of one's own modern position. This argument is often used in order to discredit historical-critical studies. It is one of the many myths thought up by the fertile imaginations of anti-historical writers. For, of course, it is entirely untrue that the great historical critics like Harnack, or the great theorists of critical history like Troeltsch, had any such idea of themselves.<sup>59</sup>

By using Barr, Räisänen thus rejects the second accusation against the historical-critical method. According to Barr's apology the accusation concerning false value-neutrality becomes a mere scholarly "myth" that understands historical criticism incorrectly. The disadvantage of this solution is that one must favor Harnack and even Troeltsch—and this is precisely what Schüssler Fiorenza and Segovia do not want to do. One begins to get the impression that there is no real interaction between the opponents' accusations and Räisänen's defense.

This leads one ask: is Räisänen correct in defending his position? Are his opponents wrong, and do they really focus on some false understandings of historical criticism? The "liberationists" present three different claims that all focus on a particular issue in the historical-critical approach.

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<sup>58</sup> Barr, *Biblical Theology*, 300.

<sup>59</sup> Barr, *Biblical Theology*, 206. Barr's influence on the discussion is so extensive that his chapter "Evaluation, Commitment, Objectivity" has been reprinted in the SBL collection where Räisänen's article is published. See Barr, *Global Village*, 149.

- (1) Positivist epistemology. The accusation is not that some scholars conducting historical criticism would merely overemphasize the role of the interpreter. Instead, positivist epistemology as such is questioned here. Critics state that historical-critical investigation does not and cannot achieve valid historical information on which theological reasoning could and should build. Positivist certainty should be replaced by the theory of discursive formations.
- (2) Historicism's reductionist reading of the Bible. The opponents state that the picture of history gained by using historical critical methodology is false. Historical information has been reduced to social phenomena and, for the new interpretation, this is not enough. An objective study in analogy to the natural sciences cannot provide plausible results. The real answer lies in empathy and engagement.
- (3) Annihilation of theology. The final accusation is that historical-critical investigation reduces originally theological statements to mundane, prosaic ideologies. New writers reinstate the demand that theology must have substance.

In the light of our earlier analysis all these accusations are valid, at least as far as Räisänen's writings are considered. This probably explains why Räisänen has taken the role of respondent in the discussion. His positivist historicism has been detected in several passages, and his sociological treatment of theological issues in the New Testament is the main purpose of his "sociology of knowledge." Furthermore, he clearly and openly annihilates traditional theology, be it Christology, soteriology, or eschatology.

In his defense Räisänen is close to Barr who recognizes similar disagreements especially when he treats Childs' hermeneutics. Barr is visibly irritated by Childs' criticism of positivist historicism, as he writes:

There remain a few questions about what appears to be Childs' ultimate weapon, namely his view of the history of ideas. This affects several of his terms, all of which are used as extremely negative symbols: Enlightenment, historicism, positivism, religion, ideology.<sup>60</sup>

Barr refuses to accept that the Western history of ideas as such would lead to a deconstruction of biblical theology. For him, this is not merely

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<sup>60</sup> Barr, *Biblical Theology*, 431. His criticism is directed at Childs' monograph on biblical theology, and the controversy is understandable; in Childs' analysis Barr usually is presented as one of the main opponents of his canonical interpretation; see Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 14, 72.

a matter of applying a materialist epistemology or reductionist historicism to the interpretation of Bible. This is why he redefines all the key terms Childs uses. For Barr, the Enlightenment means just the basis for any decent, scientific reasoning in humanist studies. He detests Childs' black-and-white interpretation of Enlightenment ideology: "By contrast, Childs demonizes the Enlightenment: to him it seems to be pure evil, the latter-day Antichrist, the universal source of absolute ruin to all Christian thinking." Barr fails to discuss the essential change in anthropology that is crucial for reinterpretations of both hamartology and soteriology. Furthermore, historicism, for Barr, is based on the idea that, "in order to understand something, the essential mode is to get at *its origins*." No discussion over Troeltsch's apparent reductionism can be found here.<sup>61</sup>

It seems that Barr is insensitive to his own methodological commitments. This creates an interesting situation: his theological hermeneutics hovers between all standard views. It no longer agrees with Reimarian historical reductionism despite the fact that Barr praises Troeltsch. But it never participates in Childs' canonical approach either, because Barr tends to call traditional theological approaches fundamentalist. The situation is practically the same as in Räisänen's hermeneutics. The belief in the rational force of the Enlightenment, supported by Weberian cultural evolutionism, makes it impossible for him to assume that an intelligent scholar would have any other approach to history than the one he himself proposes.<sup>62</sup>

What, then, could be the common element Räisänen attempts to find when stating that the opponents have merely pointed out faults that he himself wishes to criticize? It cannot be found in the accusation against the "disinterest" that critics show in their "dispassionate scholarship," because

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<sup>61</sup> Barr, *Biblical Theology*, 432–433. Childs no doubt holds that the epistemological shift that takes place in the wake of rationalism is important, but the claim that he would depict it as "pure evil" is exaggeration. In the passage that Barr refers to, Childs only writes: "As is well known, the effect of the Enlightenment and the 'turn to the subject' was to move strongly against the defining faith in terms of an objective content of beliefs and to construe it as a capacity of human consciousness." Childs, *Biblical Theology*, 261. This is actually a standard view and the one suggested by Frei in his *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, a book that Childs appears to use much in his hermeneutics. I would approach the question from another angle and remark that I have not found one philosophical overview or dictionary entry where the epistemological shift has *not* been described in the way Childs does.

<sup>62</sup> This evidently explains Barr's and Childs' opposition and disagreement above. Even though the rationalist shift in epistemology is common knowledge, many New Testament scholars do not appear to admit that it would effect the historical-critical method in any way.



this is precisely the nature of the Wredean history-of-religion approach. The Bible as well as the Christian faith in general must be investigated without any interest in the theology the texts represent. With Wrede, Räsänen and his colleagues attempt to find a scientific explanation of how religion works. They would never return to “passionate” Christian theology.

Should one assume that Sugirtharajah’s claim, quoted by Räsänen, concerning the “undermining” of the sacred writings of other faiths could serve as a uniting feature in this question?<sup>63</sup> On a superficial it probably could, but this would mean a complete misinterpretation of Räsänen’s hermeneutics. Räsänen does propose “fair play,” and he demands that the sacred scriptures of each religion be read in a similar way. There is one essential difference between Räsänen and his opponents, though. Since Räsänen does not accept “passionate” readings he drifts into contradiction with his opponents. Instead, Räsänen suggests a historical-critical reading of the Quran, the Baghavadgita, and the Book of Mormon. He has referred to these books and even provided a historical-critical reading of some of them. Räsänen’s view ends up with “fair historical-critical play.”<sup>64</sup>

What about the religious pluralism that some opponents appear to support? Räsänen quotes Luise Schottroff who criticizes the theological claim “that Jesus is the only mediator of salvation” and rejects it as “Christian imperialism.”<sup>65</sup> Räsänen certainly subscribes to such thought. Once again, superficially, this is what unites Räsänen with the opponents of historical-critical study. Here again, however, the reason for contesting “Christian imperialism” is different. Räsänen is convinced that Christology is not needed because there are no such realities as the last judgment or salvation. He annihilates the whole of theology. And this is precisely the view that gave rise to the accusations of the opponents. Räsänen no longer says that Christ means life and hope for Christians. For him, theology has no substance. This results in an erroneous reading of post-modern theology. Räsänen in his reductionist hermeneutics appears to

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<sup>63</sup> Räsänen, *Global Village*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Räsänen refers once again to the Quran and the Baghavadgita in his SBL address, and one can find an extensive analysis on the Book of Mormon in English in *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma*, 153–169. As it has been noted, the problem with Räsänen’s “fair play” is that to be consistent other religions must be subjected to the scholar’s Western values. Stell, *Moving Beyond*, 81–82.

<sup>65</sup> Räsänen, *Global Village*, 10. See Schottroff, *Reading 2*, 187–188, “We have to call into question a Christology that declares Jesus to be the *only* Lord, who exclusively mediates salvation. Such an understanding must be rejected as an expression of Christian imperialism that excludes Judaism and other religions from God’s salvation. The fact that Christ means life and hope for us must not lead us to disqualify other religions.”

be unwilling to admit that, for the new pluralist interpretation, religion as such is real. For a true Weberian hermeneutic that would an impossible position. For postmodern thinkers, however, truth is not a matter of positivist knowledge. The critics of the historical-critical method maintain that, after the rejection of modern metanarratives, religion or spirituality is one of the few areas where truth can be found.<sup>66</sup>

This is how we end up with a disagreement concerning epistemology. Räsänen fails to respond to his opponents' criticism because he wrongly locates the "Archimedes' point." He neither recognizes the main purpose of postmodern thought, nor the rejection of the metanarratives by modern thought. Räsänen and his colleagues base their approach on anti-metaphysical historicism that was at its peak when Wrede wrote his theories and Troeltsch presented his principles. Postmodern thought, that the opponents mentioned in Räsänen's article represent accurately, restores metaphysics and seeks a theology that once again has substance.

What the "late modern" change is at least partly about is what Zygmunt Bauman, the great analyst of postmodern thought, has called the "re-enchantment" of life. Culture and theology are invested with new content after the "disenchantment" that positivist historicism imposed on the age of the modern. This, of course, is reflected in Schüssler Fiorenza's and other new scholars' criticism. Positivist indifference must be replaced by involvement and a desire to make a difference.<sup>67</sup>

Postmodern criticism, from the very start, has been a project that fights over the definitions of knowledge. This was Lyotard's main theme in the *Postmodern Condition*. "To speak is to fight." The new current running up against the modern was built on a political analysis of prevailing power structures in any field one can imagine. Poststructuralist writers attacked violent hierarchies of the rich white patriarchalist world—not to mention heteronormative tradition. Positivism, in this battle, was the worst possible

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<sup>66</sup> For Räsänen, this is always a matter of historical-critical hermeneutics. In an article written a couple of years before the SBL speech, "A Biblical Critic in the Global Village: Can Exegesis Serve Inter-Religious Harmony?" Räsänen states that only historical study can lead to true fairness in dialogue: "Historical study shows that the biblical authors mostly regarded their own faith as the only true one; other alternatives amounted to idolatry. It is just the unattainable but real ideal of fairness and (relative) objectivity which helps a scholar to do greater justice to an alien tradition." Räsänen, *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma*, 7.

<sup>67</sup> "All in all, postmodernity can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity, presumptuously, has taken away; as a re-enchantment of the world that modernity tried hard to disenchant." Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, x.

enemy. This explains why historical criticism, seen through its opponents' eyes, is depicted as the main representative of positivist historicism.<sup>68</sup>

The main features of the new French movement are known well enough to any reader of philosophy. As we have noted before, the leading argument, following Derrida, was that the age of the *logos*, namely belief in permanent meaning, had died. The margins were lionized because in the new cultural democracy all discourses are equal. In theology this new movement started as a feminist wave, but gay theologies and queer-theories, as well as postcolonial theologies were to follow soon.<sup>69</sup>

This is the context for Räisänen's plenary address and Schüssler Fiorenza's response. In this light it is easy to understand why the latter did not accept the negotiating suggestions of the former. "Listening to the lecture my pleasure turned quickly into disappointment. This was not a serious engagement of voices from the margins but a subtle attempt by an esteemed colleague to safeguard the center which he rhetorically marked as historical criticism and to misrepresent the margins."<sup>70</sup>

In her response Schüssler Fiorenza relies on standard postmodern rhetoric. Räisänen is wrong because he just reinstates the old dichotomy. He keeps "defending the center" and "denies that a paradigm shift is taking place."<sup>71</sup> Since Räisänen does not want to accept the decentering, he still opposes the liberationists' work. Therefore, the contradiction continues. The new approach must pose new questions as Lyotard and Derrida did before.

It must also ask: Who has the authority in the field and to what ends it is used? How are students socialized into becoming biblical scholars and what is the ethos of the discipline into which they are socialized? How is "truth" established and to what ends? How is scholarly authority constructed and maintained?<sup>72</sup>

For Schüssler Fiorenza, liberationist hermeneutics is not just a developed form of historical-critical reading. Instead, it represents a completely new way of establishing truth. Previous definitions of knowledge are no longer valid. Historical criticism represents the *logos*, the perfect scientific

<sup>68</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 10, 37.

<sup>69</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 46–49.

<sup>70</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Global Village*, 29.

<sup>71</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Global Village*, 29–30. Scholz even states: "Räisänen's position is steeped in a worldview that post-biblical people recognise as a relic from the past." Scholz, *Moving Beyond*, 177.

<sup>72</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Global Village*, 31.

truth that dictates how theology must be done when the historical-critical analysis has first provided the material that are socially acceptable for such work.

To commit biblical studies to asking such questions, I have repeatedly argued, would engender a transformation in the self-understanding of the discipline. It would effectively change biblical studies into a rhetorical-ethical discourse that fashions connected intellectuals who can interpret the bible [*sic*] in and for an increasingly cosmopolitan public.<sup>73</sup>

In her response, thus, Schüssler Fiorenza strikes back with a passion which has been typical of the postmodern revolution from the very start. For her, "Reading the bible [*sic*] in the global village" requires that one honestly addresses the implications of the inevitable paradigm shift, "rather than reducing it to a discrete approach within the hegemonic paradigm of biblical studies as my colleague does."<sup>74</sup> Did historical criticism have a monopoly in academic biblical studies in the twentieth century? The respondent and opponent appear to disagree on this. They should not. Räisänen himself has believed so in practically all his previous writings on the issue. His hesitation here is not very convincing. This is probably the reason why Schüssler Fiorenza still speaks of a hegemonic paradigm that attempts to dictate the premises of theological hermeneutics.

Schüssler Fiorenza has proven that the conflict between her new view and Räisänen's insistence on the usefulness of the historical-critical approach is irreconcilable. Even though Räisänen would want to see a continuity between these two readings, all points of contact prove to be unjustifiable.<sup>75</sup> There is one issue—and not of minor importance, however, where Räisänen appears have a point and his criticism of liberationist hermeneutics is most likely correct. This concerns ethical reading. Schüssler Fiorenza, in her original article as well as in her response, suggests that the main issue in the "rhetorical-emancipatory paradigm shift" is an "ethics of interpretation."<sup>76</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Global Village*, 31.

<sup>74</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Global Village*, 31. For a further discussion see Stenström who wishes to see "what precisely happened" between Schüssler Fiorenza and Räisänen, and "whether it is possible to get out of this deadlock." Stenström, *Moving Beyond*, 109.

<sup>75</sup> Räisänen, *Global Village*, 22. "Rather than perceiving a radical shift, I would stress the continuity of the liberationist approach with the classical critical paradigm, of which historical criticism should be seen as a part."

<sup>76</sup> "To propose the ethics of interpretation as a new interdisciplinary area in biblical studies means to overcome that assumed dichotomy between engaged scholarship (e.g.

Räisänen reminds us that historical-critical interpretation, and at least the version he himself has represented, has always aimed at *Sachkritik* and ideology criticism. For Räisänen, this is the main reason why his position should be “recognized as a friend” of contextual theology. They agree on the claim that “moral criteria—from outside the studied texts—must be applied.”<sup>77</sup> This argument is inevitable. Schüssler Fiorenza is unwilling to admit that her many colleagues in feminist or post-colonialist readings actually apply ideological criticism and use present values to contradict biblical views. Some of the methodological tools may be different in practice, but this does not change the hermeneutical pattern.<sup>78</sup>

Räisänen successfully hits on the weak point of postmodernist readings. Even though there is no one sole movement called postmodernism but a wide spectrum of different postmodernisms, scholars have noted that they often build on the modern. In practice they use similar principles, and this is why many authors today call the postmodern in fact “late modern.” Such features are easily found in Schüssler Fiorenza’s writings. She holds to strict values and believes in the reality of categories.<sup>79</sup> In this respect, her epistemology depends on realism—not the conclusion she herself evidently would like to make. Ideological criticism always needs to cling to established values that contradict other values. In a philosophical sense, the late modern has not drifted too far from the modern.<sup>80</sup>

It is true that, despite the background in radical phenomenology, most postmodern currents gradually turned into moralist programs. They adopted unshakeable ethical values and started to perform ideological criticism against the values of previous grand metanarratives. This is the reason why old positivist Marxist theories (in liberation theology) can live

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feminist, post-colonial, African-American, queer, and other sub-disciplines) and scientific (malestream) interpretation.” Schüssler Fiorenza, *Global Village*, 44.

<sup>77</sup> Räisänen, *Global Village*, 25–26.

<sup>78</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza in fact comments on Räisänen’s reference to moral criticism but she rejects its usefulness because “this apparent agreement, however, is weakened and belied through repeated statements” that defend the historical-critical center. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Global Village*, 35.

<sup>79</sup> This view can be found in her response, as well. “Hence, a critical feminist hermeneutics cannot simply ‘apply’ or translate the solutions of the past to the problems of the present. Rather, its historical-religious imagination seeks to reconstruct the socio-political worlds of biblical writings and contemporary biblical interpretations in order to open them up for a critical inquiry and critical theological reflection.” Schüssler Fiorenza, *Global Village*, 42.

<sup>80</sup> In the theoretical discussion, this problem is called the “ethical paradox” of postmodern thought. Bauman’s description has become a standard reading in the critical assessment of postmodernism. See Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, xxii.

in agreement with more recent post-colonial theories, and even radical poststructuralism representing Derridean deconstruction.<sup>81</sup>

Even though poststructuralist theory itself, be it in philosophy, theology, or comparative literature, has been abandoned a long time ago, its moralist versions live a new life in the late modern. Radicalized phenomenology, however, no longer has a great impact on the scholarly community. Derrida's influence too is diminishing from year to year. This confirms the conclusion that Räisänen has in fact been able to prove that there is one essential point of contact between his position and the new ethical reading. Even though the conflict itself is real, this does not yet mean that Schüssler Fiorenza would be completely right in her criticism against Räisänen. New moralist programs establish values whose justification is in philosophical realism—the very philosophy that the phenomenological revolution attempted to overturn.

If this assessment of Räisänen's treatment of the "liberationist approach" is correct it further implies that late modern programs with their ideological criticism take part in the radical deconstruction of Christian theology. They too aim to dissolve Christian doctrines even up to the rejection of biblical Christology. This can be seen especially in the pluralist programs that object Christian "Christomonism" (Räisänen's term but applicable also here). Therefore, the claim that engagement and contextualization would correct the theological mistakes made by dispassionate objectivism, has little ground. It can of course change the agenda and bring new issues into the discussion. Its treatment of the original texts, however, is as liberal as Räisänen's materialist hermeneutics. Schüssler Fiorenza may be right when stating that her theoretical standpoint that focuses on decentering and new discursive practices differs from that of Räisänen's. She is wrong, however, when assuming that her theological hermeneutics differ essentially from Räisänen's idea of ever changing chain of novel interpretations.

This chapter's analysis proves that Räisänen holds to his Weberian hermeneutics even when discussing the challenge of the postmodern. In the mature phase of his career he collides with new views that have gradually made their way to the field of biblical hermeneutics. Räisänen is both consistent and persistent in applying his chain of interpretation even

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<sup>81</sup> For instance, Schottroff still states: "There is as yet no coherent sociological model for this work [i.e. new sociohistorical interpretation], but Karl Marx can still function as a good teacher." Schottroff, *Reading 2*, 187. Míguez-Bonino, however, is quite critical of materialist Marxist analysis. Míguez-Bonino, *Voices*, 80.

here. He claims that any reading opposing the Bible's original thought world ends up with ideological criticism. New values that are applied in the process produce new readings that probably are linked to the tradition, but no longer accept its message. The age of reason wins. Religious communities develop contextual readings that are considered to have higher ethical value than the writings providing the original tradition. In this respect, for Räsänen, the late modern views confirm his grand theory about the evolution of religion in the West.

### 9.5. *The Fall of Christian Belief*

What, then, is the final result and conclusion of the analysis made in this study? How should one identify the nature of Räsänen's hermeneutics and define the particular features of his interpretation theory? Where does he start and what is he aiming at? The analytical results point in one direction. Ever since the early days of his career, Räsänen has attempted to construct an immanent way to deal with the results of the historical-critical investigation of the Bible. For him, early Christianity appears as an undeveloped, primitive community where people exploit myths when dealing with the crises of their group. Räsänen is convinced that he has found parallels between New Testament writers and Muhammad, all of them creating theology in a similar way. They use tradition, the very tradition that they have been taught in the community, and reinterpret it in the light of their so-called experiences—social conflicts and personal crises in constantly changing situations.

Räsänen's hermeneutics is neither a simple construction nor an integrated whole, though. He has used several principles that no longer form a consistent unity. He is an inductivist who speaks about failing hypotheses. He is a positivist who writes on poststructuralism. He is a nominalist who believes in strict realist values. There is one issue, however, that surpasses other questions in his theology. It can be put into the form of a question: What happens when the Wredean history-of-religion approach meets Weberian hermeneutics? Räsänen has constructed an interpretation theory where Weberian science-of-religion sociology has been combined with the evolutionary understanding that culminates in rationalism. This, as we claim in the present investigation, is the hermeneutical pattern that best illustrates what Räsänen attempts to do with ancient texts. Räsänen's later phase where he uses Berger and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge is a secondary development that only provides minor adjustments to the one and the same hermeneutical theory.



For a start we must return to the question about the relation between doctrine and religion. Earlier analyses in this study have proven that Rowland's and Räsänen's Wredean theory has difficulties in defining religion in general and Christianity in particular. This is due to the fact that they usually deny any strict boundaries between these two. Essential questions necessarily emerge. What is Christianity, if Räsänen is right and it has never had, and especially in New Testament times, any clear doctrinal content? The so-called early biblical theology (traditionally understood), cannot be identified with the later canonical theology of the New Testament. Instead, scholars in the new vein want to study all relevant religious phenomena extant locally and sociologically in the region they wish to focus on. This leads one ask: what will they study in Roman Palestine, Judea, Galilea, and Decapolis—not to mention Galatia and Macedonia? If religion as such, according to the theory, is neither an ideological entity directed by doctrines, nor a semiotic system, what can it be? Räsänen, apparently, is still after the *eigentlich gewesen*. He wants to investigate what was there before the canonical writings. Form history and redaction criticism are vital for his theory. Problems are easily anticipated: if the New Testament does not dictate the limits of interpretation, what can both direct and limit investigation?<sup>82</sup>

There is a great danger that any analysis this vague will fall apart. Should one focus on people or different regions as Klaus Berger did? What if one attempts to investigate the phenomenon of religion in general, as Räsänen seems to suggest—or at least should suggest? The religious field of Roman Palestine is quite wide. If these scholars take their own premises for granted they should study all religious phenomena from the Stoa to Midrash/Mithra. This is where the history-of-religions school in the nineteenth century drifted in.<sup>83</sup>

Can the Wredean religio-historical approach avoid this dead end that has been visited already in the nineteenth century? What can come in its stead? As we saw in chapter 6 Räsänen, despite his interest in the history of religion, does not in fact aim at a science-of-religion approach. Something

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<sup>82</sup> Investigation is always limited and directed by certain views. This is not an issue I care to discuss, but it often needs to be mentioned. Räsänen's investigation is very organized and has both a purposeful aim and a clear structure. Premises for such an approach necessarily come from contemporary ideologies.

<sup>83</sup> We must not forget what history teaches: the history-of-religion school produced numerous monographs a hundred years ago, like that of Bousset's *Kyrios Christos*. Later, however, most of their conclusions have been abandoned in scholarship—even by Räsänen. See for instance Kümmel, *Investigation*, 245–275. Frey is right in noting that Wrede's program was fulfilled best precisely in Bousset's work. Frey, *Aufgabe*, 29.

else has entered in. Both Rowland and Räisänen restrict their study and focus to a certain traditional continuity, without however admitting the importance of the Old Testament. For instance Rowland states that he focuses on Judaism and all its colorful expressions at this crucial period. The messianic Jesus-movement belongs to the latter. This is as far as he gets from the New Testament. In fact, most of his analysis treats New Testament texts.

The analysis, thus, has proved that there is an inner contradiction in Räisänen's hermeneutical theory. Following Wrede, he has wished to create a renewed history-of-religion method. This is so evident in his writings that it cannot be doubted. Even though Räisänen does change the original theory, his purpose remains the same. For him, New Testament theology and history of early Christian religion must theoretically be seen as mutually exclusive alternatives. For some reason, however, Räisänen does not even attempt to perform a science of religion study of early Christian phenomena. He clings to a thematic approach and discusses issues of traditional New Testament theology. This is also something he himself openly admits in his *Beyond*.<sup>84</sup>

Yet I am personally still inclined to maintain some continuity with traditional "New Testament Theology" in focusing on a discussion of religious *thought* in Early Christianity. This is not because thought is the most important aspect in a religion (or, specifically, in Christianity); that is disputable. It is rather a personal decision, partly made for pragmatic reasons: one must begin *somewhere*, and a comprehensive history of early Christian religion (cult, rite, myth, communality) would be too immense a task to be at all realistic except as teamwork. An account of early Christian thought is a task worth undertaking, no matter what its relative importance as compared with other tasks may be.<sup>85</sup>

Räisänen could take the *Wredestrasse*, as it has been called, and develop for instance what Bousset suggested a century ago. He is aware that the purpose of the method, as well as its basic intentions, point in that direction. There are other motives, though. With his decision Räisänen returns to the standard paradigm of New Testament theology, as scholars have

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<sup>84</sup> Hahn remarks in his analysis on Räisänen's method that history of religion should in principle be interested in the variety and multiplicity of different religions and in distinctive religious phenomena. Studies should focus on concrete religions and attempt to compare different forms of religion and religious behavior. Hahn, *Studien I*, 152. This is not precisely what Räisänen practices in his work. Getty, in her review of the *Rise*, notes that Räisänen "pays scant attention to early liturgy," as well as to many practical issues in Christian life. Getty, *CBQ* 74 (2012) 396.

<sup>85</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, 105.

noted.<sup>86</sup> When answering his critics in a later discussion Räsänen explicates his position in detail. He has “chosen the society,” as he says elsewhere. He has focused on early Christian thought because, for him, that is what religion is all about.

I admit that my brief outline to which Moxnes refers does not reveal any deviations from a thematically arranged “New Testament Theology” (apart from the fact that “eschatology” is found at the beginning and not in the end). This outline is indeed not much more than a list of conventional catchwords; in carrying out the actual project [the *Rise*] I shall not use “-logies” in headings, and I try to use such terms (e.g. “Christology”) sparingly and in inverted commas. It is true that my approach stands in continuity with the tradition of New Testament Theologies “in focussing on a discussion of religious *thought* in Early Christianity”—not because I assume that the cognitive aspect is the most important one in religion (I do not), but because “ideas and mental conceptions loom large enough among the influences on Western culture that have emanated from Christianity to keep some interest in them alive.”<sup>87</sup>

What, then, can motivate and justify such a complete reinterpretation of the history-of-religion approach? Is Räsänen just careless about or uncertain of his task? Not at all. He is a convinced sociologist. The main result of the present investigation about Räsänen’s hermeneutical views concerns his understanding of the symbolic world. For Räsänen, religion is a social phenomenon and, therefore, can be studied by sociology. The reason for focusing on cognitive issues is in his *sacralized culturalism*.

Religion, for Räsänen, is not about cult and rite. There were such phenomena especially in the pre-modern world, in the phase when theology and metaphysics were the means for human beings to interpret their existence and relation to their environment. Cult and rite, however, must now be subjected to the verdict of the Weberian metanarrative. They can be treated as real phenomena but they do not reveal the essence of religion.

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<sup>86</sup> Earlier we noted that Moxnes criticized Räsänen for making such a choice in the *Beyond* when adopting a thematic presentation. Moxnes, *Moving Beyond*, 264. Räsänen, answering Moxnes in the same collection, admits that neither his brief outlines nor his later work (referring to the *Rise*) reveal any deviations from a thematically arranged “New Testament Theology.” “Quoting a passage from *Beyond New Testament Theology*, Moxnes states that my suggestion of a possible thematic presentation of early Christian thought falls within the same old paradigm; the topics and terminology in my outline for my own planned presentation (eschatology, soteriology, Christology, etc.) do not actually reflect the ‘radical suggestions’ I make elsewhere in the book”. Räsänen, *Moving Beyond*, 438.

<sup>87</sup> Räsänen, *Moving Beyond*, 438–439; referring to *Beyond*, 165. In a footnote he also answers similar criticism presented earlier by Levine, see *Moving Beyond*, 439, fn. 145.

Therefore, religion must be investigated as a mental structure. For Räsänen, it always necessarily concerns contemporary religious thought. He treats social and ideological changes as religious changes because religion itself is studied merely as a social element. In Weberian sociology of religion—at least in its Bergerian version—culture influences the prevailing religious system, and the religious symbolic world affects culture. This spiral or chain is the perfect sociological explanation of religion. Räsänen is not very conscious of his premises when, in the quotation above, he denies thinking that “the cognitive aspect is the most important one in religion.” From the perspective of sociology of knowledge it is. Räsänen may leave space for other scholars in the history-of-religion current to focus on cult and rite, but his own explanation sees things otherwise.<sup>88</sup>

The reader cannot escape the impression that, for Räsänen, the Wre-dean theory has been but a means for justifying a purely historical treatment of New Testament “theology.” This is why Räsänen cannot help using theological catchwords and themes. His historical-critical investigation focuses on the diversity of the essentially Christian faith. For some reason, in his answers to his critics, he has been unable to justify the use of the thematic approach by his hermeneutical theory, but the point in his responses is clear: centering on religious thought is at the core of his theory. One clarification needs to be made, though. Räsänen does believe in the occurrence of doctrinal constructions; he just does not believe in their truth-value. This is the heritage of the historical-critical tradition. The same could also be expressed in a late-modern way. Räsänen does not believe that a doctrine could represent a transcendental signified. After metaphysics has been rejected, doctrinal constructions have no substance. They are seen merely as linguistic, indicative expressions. Hence the heretical imperative that Berger launched.

For Räsänen, the investigation of the history of early Christian religion simply means the detecting, organizing and analyzing of theological expressions, doctrinal constructions and religious thought, in different cultural contexts. This is also why Räsänen dismantles the concept of “Christianity” by rejecting the canon and, even more than Rowland did, denying the possibility of any normative doctrine. In this process tradition becomes important.<sup>89</sup> The continuity of tradition is not an self-evident issue,

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<sup>88</sup> See the analysis in 3.7. above.

<sup>89</sup> Some scholars have speculated on the evolutionary nature of Räsänen's theory. Why should one expect there to be a chain and a directing tradition? The reason for this is simple: one has to end up with the canon. In his hermeneutics Räsänen appears to have done

however, in a situation where there are no doctrines. One is compelled to ask: what is transmitted if practically nothing is received? Räisänen apparently needs some kind of smallest common denominator, and one must suppose it is Jesus' name. Without this name the continuity of tradition is hardly possible. The link is weak. Here, however, we have found Räisänen's most important theoretical tool. *He must believe in the continuity of tradition*, because it justifies his theory.

Tradition is crucial for the strategy of explaining the development of culture and religion. Without tradition it would be difficult to explain how the alleged diversity could gradually develop into orthodox Christianity. Therefore, Räisänen states, religion will not fall apart. It has unified chains of tradition that also justify his investigation. This must be one of the reasons why Räisänen, in spite of his daring new theory, focuses mostly on canonical writings and also studies polarizations between these writings and other religious texts of the time. Hence, the canon has a special place in Räisänen's history-of-religion approach, whatever he may say about its significance in theory.<sup>90</sup>

Räisänen's own theory, then, begins to threaten the consistency of his thought. If there are no conventional beliefs and doctrines, what is left of tradition? Does Räisänen mean merely cult, liturgy, and the Scriptures? But if these are treated only as sources for inner experiences, they surely cannot serve as doctrinal tradition. When focusing heavily on tradition Räisänen questions his other presuppositions and drifts into a situation where he, despite all other claims, reinstates the status and significance of doctrine—even the early doctrinal formulations that inevitably transmit tradition.<sup>91</sup>

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what he claims Paul has done: making deductive inferences from solution to plight and leaping to secondary rationalizations that produce imaginative explorations on the alleged phases that have gradually produced the "orthodox" canon of the New Testament.

<sup>90</sup> The question about continuity is difficult, and Räisänen never presents any clear explanation about the principles that have been chosen. It sounds too easy to call the uniting tradition merely the Jewish-Christian tradition because such term is dependent on the canon. Penner pays attention to the same issue when commenting that Räisänen's readings "tend to emphasise continuity with traditions." Penner raises the question, though, about whether this can be done "without sacrificing the particularity." Penner, *Moving Beyond*, 28.

<sup>91</sup> This problem is related to Hasel's criticism of Collins. He remarks that when Collins, in the same manner as Räisänen, questions the importance of the canon and holds beliefs as fictionalizings, "why should there be an appeal to that tradition in the first place?" Hasel declares that such a move would necessarily mean a step backward: "If any such appeal were granted, it would seem to follow that a 'confessional' or 'dogmatic' aspect, which is highly eschewed in Collins' model, is reintroduced on historical grounds." Hasel, *Andrews*

To be precise, Räisänen does not appear to deny that (some) early Christian congregations had defined and adopted particular doctrines. He just denies that any doctrine could be set as a criterion for a proper religious identity. He uses a kind of “criterion of originality.” The most original of them, Jesus with his teachings, meant practically nothing for the doctrines of different apostles, though. In this Räisänen is still close the radical Jesus-studies of Strauss and Bultmann. Most doctrines have been created in different communities decades after the historical events Jesus went through. Räisänen is destined to explain the emergence of doctrines as a process of stagnation. This raises again the question about his relation to Adolf von Harnack, a detail that needs to be discussed later on. “Original religion,” as Räisänen says, does not rely on dogmas, but on experience that cannot be controlled. He uses this kind of explanation already when explaining the nature of Paul’s theology, as we saw in the preceding chapters.

Therefore, one may assume, Räisänen could write a canonical New Testament theology, or at least some kind of overview on its main themes, just as Conzelmann and Lohse have done, should he choose to do so. Our analysis of the *Rise* above has confirmed that his own book would justify a presentation of this kind of “chain of interpretation.” This is where one surprising feature of Räisänen’s hermeneutics needs to be mentioned. In his *Beyond* he actually himself states that this is the point of departure that he accepts even though he prefers the sociological. Even though his entire train of thought for years and decades has proven to be the opposite, Räisänen does leave room for a standard “New Testament theology.” He just leaves it to the church, not to academic circles.

“New Testament theology” may be a legitimate part of self-consciously *ecclesial* theology. By contrast, those of us who work in a broader *academic* context should abandon such an enterprise (and, *a fortiori*, any dreams of a “biblical theology” which would cover both Testaments).<sup>92</sup>

There are, thus, two different principles in tension in Räisänen’s hermeneutical theory. He has first adopted the historical-critical conviction that the theological diversity of the canonical writings has made the

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*University Studies* 33 (1955) 59. These two scholars appear to end up with a similar inconsistency in their hermeneutical theory.

<sup>92</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond*, xviii. Balla in fact begins his analysis with this quotation but I have saved it until now because only now have we gathered the material that enables us to explain the dichotomy Räisänen has built in his hermeneutics. Cf. Balla, *Challenges*, 1.

construction of a New Testament theology impossible (following Bultmann, Käsemann, and Dunn). Simultaneously, however, Räisänen admits that, remaining inside the limits of the canon, it would be possible to write an ecclesial theology after all. It would be directed by a religious (orthodox Christian) commitment but, nevertheless, it could be done.

This may sound consistent because Räisänen, following Wrede, maintains that history of religion must abandon canons and later dogmas and seek an original religious enthusiasm. It is only to be expected that this kind of “religion” must lie behind the textual reality of a late ecclesial compilation of books—which moreover is a result of a long process of selection, redaction and editing. Consistency fails, though. Räisänen’s dichotomy creates an anachronism because he admits that the diversity he speaks about is *not* to be found in the canonical writings themselves. What should one do with Käsemann in such a situation?

What Räisänen has done, as we have already seen during this analysis, is that in his *Rise* he has partly abandoned Käsemann’s diversity thesis. He no longer claims that all essential contradictions can be found in the canonical texts as they exist today. Instead, Räisänen paints a broader picture where discrepancies are located in a long history where alleged early groups (behind the texts) adopt different beliefs than later groups, extending from Jewish apocalypticism to gnosticism. As far as the canonical writings are considered, Räisänen leaves room for the Third Quest and its new constructions of the historical Jesus, and he mitigates his earlier convictions concerning Christological diversity. The basic contradiction, then, lies between historical (social) reality and the canon.

Such a treatment of canonical material proves Räisänen’s work to be ideological. His “academic” approach is a move against ecclesial identity. He believes that it is both rational and scientific to work merely on science-of-religion premises. He makes it clear to his readers that he is not interested in the canonical alternative. He is not after ecclesial theology. Instead, his history-of-religion project must aim at investigating religion, as he so often states in his writings. The history-of-religion approach means a kind of psychological analysis of religion. Wrede says, through Räisänen, that we must not focus on texts but something behind them.

One has to pay attention above all not to the documents, but rather to what lies behind them. Only in this way can the woods be seen from the trees.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond 2nd ed.*, 23.



Writing in the tradition of Reimarus and Wrede, as we noted in the first subchapter above, and following the trajectory of Bultmann before him, Räisänen wishes to understand the essential nature of religion itself. This is one of the most important statements Räisänen makes in his *Beyond*. As regards the present discussion on hermeneutics what Wrede the rationalist said in the eighteenth century is not that important. The important part is how Räisänen reads him when developing renewed “biblical theology” or rather a history of religion that will replace the former.<sup>94</sup>

The psycho-pathology of religion aims at explaining religious phenomena. Following Wrede, Räisänen admits that canonical texts can even prevent one from achieving this goal. This is due to the fact that writings that still have dogmatic weight and an intention to condemn many authentic experiences of religion as heresy. For Räisänen, the New Testament as such, as a canonical text in its final form, represents the “winner’s religion,” as Räisänen’s champion Cupitt put it. The victorious doctrine attempts to combat and hide the original multiplicity of the early Jesus-movement.<sup>95</sup> The task of a New Testament scholar, according to Räisänen, is to free the world of original religious experience that lies captured behind the guard kept by the canon. This is the only way to see the woods “from the trees.” Hence in the history-of-religion treatment of the New Testament the “final text” or the canonical text cannot have a central position. This is also one of the leading principles in *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*. The conflicting views of the early Jesus-movement and its rival groups cannot always be detected in the canonical text as it is. They can be found only by making a historical-critical reconstruction that sees behind the texts themselves. In this respect, this is really a Wredean project.

This is also how the above-mentioned Harnackian nature of Räisänen’s interpretation theory is emphasized. Considering his hermeneutical views one can assume that in his estimation, dogma is a mental picture. It is but a product of pure imagination. This reminds us of Adolf von Harnack who in his famous lectures *Das Wesen des Christentums* (The Essence of Christianity), explained the emergence of dogmas by claiming that they are the result of a degenerative process in church history. Harnack stated

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<sup>94</sup> Räisänen has learned from Bultmann, too, since the latter was quite convinced that proper hermeneutics is able to understand the very nature of religion. In Bultmann’s case the explanation of religion was a metaphysical enterprise. It is somewhat astonishing that Räisänen assumes that he is able to explain the true nature of religion without metaphysical reasoning.

<sup>95</sup> See the analysis of Cupitt’s ideas in chapter 4.

that original religious enthusiasm, seen in early Christianity and also in Paul's congregations, faded gradually away.<sup>96</sup> As an institution was constructed, tradition was petrified and doctrinal statements replaced religious freedom.<sup>97</sup> Räisänen, too, assumes that the original diversity of Christian experience was replaced by particular doctrines that were used as weapons in the violent power struggles of the early church.

Point by point, thus, we have been proceeding towards one inevitable conclusion: in Räisänen's opinion, diversity lies in fact *behind* the canonical texts themselves. In his history-of-religion project he is driven by the results of the Reimarian and Straussian historical-critical explanation of history "as it really happened." A certain change has taken place, though. Reimarus and his followers all the way to Bultmann (and probably Räisänen himself in his early days) still believed that contradictions, myths and lies appear in the extant biblical writings—just like they appear in the Quran. Räisänen's hermeneutical theory in its last form is more sophisticated. He assumes that diversity can be detected in the pre-canonical ecclesial enthusiasm where uneducated charismatic believers were not interested in doctrines but in signs and wonders.

As a result, Räisänen does belittle the significance of canonical doctrines, but his approach does not precisely rival the traditional New Testament theology investigation as a scientific theory. He is not primarily interested in the texts themselves. The importance of the canon and even its detailed investigation, in fact, is rejected altogether. The canon, however, lives a life of its own. As we noted above, Räisänen admits that canonical texts do have a rather high-profile theological nature. In fact he assumes that the texts have a doctrinal system that opposes free experience and condemns heresies. The "religion of the winners" does have a doctrinal structure. Conversely one can state, simultaneously, that Räisänen in fact proves that early Christianity had an interest in a doctrinal definition of salvific faith.

Compared with Strecker and Schnelle, however, Räisänen would never put the resurrection at the core of New Testament religious identity. In this respect he differs from the Bultmannians who still search for some

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<sup>96</sup> As we saw in the analysis, Räisänen finds "spiritualizing tendencies" in Paul and claims that they are "influenced by popular Platonic-Stoic notions." *Rise*, 105. Paul's conception of the flesh continues "the legacy of Platonic dualism," (*Rise*, 144) and for Paul, "the critical turning point in the life of believers was their reception of the spirit," (not meeting with Christ, or justification, etc.) *Rise*, 188.

<sup>97</sup> Harnack, *Das Wesen*, 16–18.

kind of center in early Christian theology—not to mention the adherents of canonical criticism or narratology. Räisänen has completely left behind such an approach. The basic reason for this, presumably, is that he believes that there never was a religion that could have centered on the doctrine of the resurrection. And he can assume this despite the fact that, in agreement with Strecker and Schnelle, he can admit that many or perhaps most New Testament texts themselves give Jesus' resurrection a crucial role in their belief-system. How can one avoid the conclusion that Räisänen actually aims to contest New Testament theology instead of just claiming it impossible?<sup>98</sup>

Therefore, it becomes obvious that Räisänen, in his hermeneutical theory, provides no interpretation theory or method that could be applied to New Testament writings as they stand. He is not interested in the content of the canonical writings themselves. Sacralized culturalism makes him interpret religion exclusively. Tradition will not prove conceptual continuity because Räisänen's theory is "textualist." There is no substance to the "story." Expressions changes, words and concepts change. For Räisänen, new cultural or religious expressions *are* the new form of religion.

This is why Räisänen does not follow even Stendahl. For him, "what it meant" and "what it means" never meet. In his *Beyond* he states:

Could not Christians reinterpret and re-apply their tradition, including biblical tradition, with good conscience, knowing that "what it might mean" need not be identical with any of the things it may once have "meant."<sup>99</sup>

For Räisänen, no canonical text means anything today. Historians working with the texts subject them to historical-critical analysis. This results in the total deconstruction of the Bible—somewhat paradoxically though, because the alleged diversity lies actually in the pre-canonical phase. "What it meant" was, in Räisänen's opinion, just some mythical or metaphysical way of understanding religion. Therefore, for him, "what it means" is anything that contemporary people experience and how they interpret it, in

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<sup>98</sup> Penner in fact claims that Räisänen is working "from the margins of historical-critical tradition," and even questions the German way of treating New Testament writings. "By contrast, in Räisänen's *Beyond New Testament Theology*, German scholarship as a whole is challenged exactly on this point: its implicit theological agenda. From *within* the broader historical-critical tradition, Räisänen's insistence on a *religionswissenschaftliche* configuration of the approach to the study of early Christian traditions places him not only on the margins of church/theology, but, as a result, also on the margins of historical criticism in its most dominant (and dominating) expressions and forms." Penner, *Moving Beyond*, 26–27.

<sup>99</sup> Räisänen, *Beyond 2nd ed.*, 208.

the context of the Christian church. Or to be exact: in the context of any extant religion that serves values that protect life and increase tolerance and happiness.<sup>100</sup>

These views make Räsänen's hermeneutical theory almost completely identical with that of Bultmann:

- (1) According to Bultmann, no New Testament proposition has transcendental substance. Instead, all propositions necessarily express mythical thinking. All that theologians have today is apophatic kerygma (religious experience) that represents human self-understanding in this world.
- (2) According to Räsänen, no New Testament theological proposition has transcendental substance. They express the "panorama of natural religion," mostly mythological. All that theologians have as their material is religious experience (a sort of ecstatic "kerygma") that represents human self-understanding in this world.<sup>101</sup>

Räsänen's *The Rise of Christian Belief* is, therefore, a book about religion. It can be understood only in the light of his hermeneutical theory. Instead of writing a New Testament theology in any sense, Räsänen presents a deconstruction of canonical texts. In his book he attempts to explain how religion works. It is in fact a cultural project. Räsänen states that religious beliefs develop quite like ideologies. As previous ideas that are transmitted in tradition are received in new situations, new readings emerge. Social situations direct new interpretations. Religion, for Räsänen, is part of culture, part of human reasoning and fruit of human imagination.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> According to Stell, Räsänen emphasizes the historical nature of biblical texts to the extent that he rejects the field of "contemporizing" entirely. "The historical interpretation of religion appears markedly different from Räsänen's consistent polemic against contemporizing, which he sees as a perversion of historical understanding." Stell, *Moving Beyond*, 94; cf. 82–83. Stell complains that Räsänen is inconsistent here since there is a "contemporizing tendency" in his writings. Stell has apparently seen the problem but does not yet link it with Räsänen's sociological view. Laffey, writing in the same collection, refers to the very same problem. Laffey, *Moving Beyond*, 54.

<sup>101</sup> I would not want to push the comparison of similarities too far, though. As I have argued, Bultmann and Räsänen understand religious experience differently. Bultmann still seeks a metaphysical experience (*Erlebnis*) where God addresses people on a non-propositional level. For Räsänen, experience is reduced to social events, mostly crises, in the context of which human beings reinterpret their tradition in a new way.

<sup>102</sup> In this respect, Räsänen is quite independent. For him, Bultmann is too existentialist, Barr too theological, and Theissen too semiotic. Sanders is too optimistic about history, as is probably Klaus Berger who has not followed the Wredean program consistently. Segovia

There is a normative element in Räsänen's treatment of religion, though. He cannot accept every theological expression nor every interpretation of experience. There is bad culture and good culture. For Räsänen, the "rise of Christian belief" is simultaneously "the fall of Christian belief." Orthodox views are condemned without hesitation. In the end, Räsänen holds for a Kantian ideal: theology in the new situation is directed by ethics. Scholars and theologians must find enduring values that support life, in order to discern between violent views and useful ideas. It is both surprising and sad that most of Christian dogma, be it Christology or soteriology, falls into the category of harmful or dangerous ideology. In Räsänen's new church there is neither sacrificial atonement nor sacraments.

Finally, before making our concluding remarks in this investigation, we must draw some conclusions about the influence of philosophy both on biblical hermeneutics in general and Räsänen's hermeneutics in particular. As Räsänen has been much engaged in ideological criticism, it is proper to make certain comments on the larger ideological background of his hermeneutics. This study suggests that the history of Protestant hermeneutics has been a battlefield for three different currents. First, theistic Christian theology still believes in revelation and attempts to build a biblical theology on these premises. Second, Hegelian idealism made several scholars, like Strauss for example, interpret biblical theology as a mere compilation of universal ideas. God was still there, though. For Bultmann, this was the basic justification for divine kerygma. Third, Kantian phenomenology gradually took over and transformed Christian biblical theology into an ethical theory.

In addition to this, one must note that the Kantian tradition has in fact affected two quite different currents in recent hermeneutics. Phenomenology has had an impact on both the very immanent theories and the spiritualized kerygmatic theories. Bultmann, who was inspired by Heidegger, intentionally opposed the one-sided ethical interpretation of Neo-Kantian liberal Protestantism—but he was convinced that it was German phenomenology that justified his ideas. Poststructuralist hermeneutics, in turn, builds on phenomenology but aspires to be a nominalist theory where the absence of God is the only certain point of departure scholars can postulate. The theory itself, somewhat paradoxically, focuses on ethics.

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is too spiritual, and Schüssler Fiorenza too ideological. There are not many scholars, particularly those involved in discussion on hermeneutics, whose work Räsänen would completely accept. Even Peter Berger refuses to abandon metaphysics and, therefore, Räsänen keeps his distance.

Theological hermeneutics in the age of historical criticism has thus certain distinctive features that can be discerned and classified or listed as separate programs. The basic issue, as one would expect, concerns the relation of history and theology. Should biblical theology be seen as an interpretation of the text itself or is it just an idealist construction behind the text? Should it be based on a historical reconstruction, reduction, or demythologization? One essential problem has been that biblical theology has not treated the content of the text but focused mainly on hypothetical reconstructions.

From this analysis, it is possible to present a detailed classification of hermeneutical theories belonging to the Reimarian or Kantian tradition in the age of historical criticism. It is not the only possible reconstruction but it reflects the ideological changes that have moulded the interpretation of biblical theology. According to different theories, New Testament theology should concern:

- (1) the idealist structure of the ahistorical core of the New Testament (Gabler following Kant)
- (2) *Begriffe* as eternal truths of mythological *Vorstellungen* (Strauss following Hegel)
- (3) a philosophical alternative for the demythologized text (Bultmann following Heidegger)
- (4) a "normative" meaningful conceptual system based on a hypothetical historical reconstruction (Stendahl following the history-of-religions school and Bultmann)
- (5) an ideological assessment and *Sachkritik* of the alleged historical reality and theological diversity behind the extant canon (Räsänen following Buri and Wrede)
- (6) contemporary issues questioning the patriarchal tradition and providing a new asexual concept of God for the present humankind in every culture and on every continent (Schüssler Fiorenza, Sugirtharajah, Vander Stichele, Stenström, Laffey, following the postmodern agenda).

The basic structure in many of these theories is quite similar. They tend to make a distinction between the historical-critical treatment of the texts and the theological or ideological content of the texts. Stendahl has obviously been right when stating that—at least concerning the historical-critical movement—the descriptive task and the normative task have been separated from each other. This kind of history explains further why we have all these books on biblical hermeneutics that seldom deal

with New Testament texts themselves. Monographs from Wrede's texts to Stendahl and Räisänen's *Beyond* do not present analyses of particular texts but postulate grand principles instead.<sup>103</sup>

The point of departure, during the age of historical criticism, has been historical criticism's minimalist use of strict criteria. And even this minimum—Schweitzer reading the Gospels was left with a blank sheet—was to be subjected to *Sachkritik*. In this kind of situation the hermeneutical task of the scholar has been either to save whatever can be saved, or to escape behind the texts into the world of ideas, to the perfect rational a priori principles that can never be questioned in any context.

There have been different attempts to define "theological." It has comprised general theological concepts, ideas, universal truths, kerygma, or even universal religious beliefs common to several groups. Postmodern theories have taken interpretation even further. They do not accept the complete separation of "meant" and "means," however, and emphasize the principle of contemporizing. In most of these cases, however, the "eclipse" of the narrative has increased.

Post-liberal programs have defined the task in quite another way. Biblical hermeneutics, especially in a positive and constructive sense, has to base its views on the extant texts. This approach has made scholars discuss the question of the "rule of faith," for example, or the common metanarratives that direct theological thought in different writings. Some scholar focus on the eschatological restoration of Israel, and others on the messianic appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. All these readings are important because they argue on textual evidence, not on philosophy or issues of world view.<sup>104</sup>

Räisänen's sociological hermeneutics is rather unique in this company because he is one of the few scholars to proclaim the complete abandon-

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<sup>103</sup> The idea comes from Frei's humoristic remark in the beginning of his *Eclipse*: his essay "falls into the almost legendary category of analysis of analyses of the Bible in which not a single text is examined, not a single exegesis undertaken." Frei, *Eclipse*, vii. Frei and certain other scholars can be pardoned for this but several hermeneutical programs making extraordinary claims about the content of the New Testament cannot. To say something about the texts needs textual evidence and this is where the weakness of the historical-critical approach is revealed: it deals with reductions and negations. It bases its claims too often on what the text does not say. In a philosophical sense many of its theses are based on *argumentum e silentio*.

<sup>104</sup> For example Evans investigates the importance of the rule of faith in biblical interpretation, Evans, *Behind the Text*, 320–336. Scott, in turn, suggests that Jesus' vision for the restoration of Israel can be set as the basis of biblical theology, Scott, *Biblical Theology*, 129–143.



ment of metaphysics. As noted during the study, Räisänen probably has meant his hermeneutics as a critique of earlier historical-critical interpretation theories. These have not been able to find a plausible alternative to traditional biblical theology. Universal truths or anthropological speculations cannot compete with soteriology or Christology. Räisänen has embraced materialism and attempts to understand history as the only reality there is. He is more dependent on Weber and Comte, then, than Wolff or Heidegger.

What is left, as a result, is negative theology. Räisänen unconsciously follows the post-War tradition of the death-of-God movement. Like Altizer, Cupitt, and Moore he writes apophatic hermeneutics. Read in a philosophical perspective, thus, biblical hermeneutics has been closely connected with the greatest struggle in the history of Western philosophy, namely that between realism and nominalism. While realism has still wanted to penetrate metaphysical reality, this attempt has been questioned by nominalism's demand for a focus merely on observable reality. Derrida's deconstruction, too, aimed at the rejection of the transcendental signified, and he claimed that the age of the sign as a permanent meaning had been "essentially theological." It appears that immanent materialist world view has induced nominalism.<sup>105</sup>

The basic question that describes the situation and reveals the ideological tension is simple: are categories to be considered real? As we analyze the history of hermeneutics, it is easy to see that scholars are not very comfortable with this question. Räisänen, whose work has been the mirror through which we have assessed the wider discussion, abandons metaphysics. He cannot accept the dualist solutions, be they Hegelian or more generally metaphysical, that still admit that religious language has an object and, therefore, that theological categories should be considered real. This belief then contradicts Räisänen's standard rationalist epistemology according to which, at least in the sphere of scholarly investigation, *categories are real* despite all the criticism of metaphysics.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> A reflection of these views can be seen in Räisänen's treatment of the two currents in the science of religion that he often discusses. Räisänen, naturally, abandons the "transcendentalist" approach but, furthermore, with the "empiricists" he claims that the science of religion (and New Testament interpretation respectively) must be "agnosticist" as far the method itself is considered ("methodologisch agnostisch"). Räisänen, *Neutestamentliche Theologie?*, 68. The linking of the terms agnostic or atheist with methodology derives from positivist discourse and implies the abandoning of metaphysics.

<sup>106</sup> Räisänen's reluctance to apply a phenomenological view of language to scientific language, or even to every-day language, reveals that he still ascribes to the rationalist

Such an inconsistency between ontology and epistemology is surprisingly common in Western scholarship. One could say that this is precisely what poststructuralism has attempted to challenge with its radicalized nominalism. As long as scholars speak of categories that are more than just general concepts, words in a system, they rest on ontological implications and work as if they are still building on metaphysics. When speaking about religious truth, however, they can at the same time deny the possibility of metaphysics—at least in the sense of theological truth. It is true that metaphysics and theology are not to be understood as identical but, despite all caution here, in epistemology they belong to the same field.<sup>107</sup>

Great metaphysical systems like that of Hegel wished to solve the above-mentioned inconsistency by relying on metaphysical dualism. There must be a transcendent reality that directly affects this world. Räsänen denies this and suggests a sociological reading. Other scholars have been close to this and, just in order to avoid the contradiction, attempted to limit the scope of the investigation by focusing merely on the immanent realm. They claim that they can leave the transcendental question more or less intact. Berger proposes a phenomenological version of this, and Theissen focuses on language. Räsänen himself, however, attacks Christian religion as such. He is not content merely with describing early Christian views as they appear (as phenomena) but, instead, he presents strict ontological statements about the reality of religion in general. He applies *Sachkritik*, ideological criticism, to Christian faith.

Therefore, the final outcome of the analysis is that there is a philosophical tension and an epistemological inconsistency in Räsänen's hermeneutical theory. He has adopted principles that contradict each other. His theory is not philosophically sensitive but, instead, still reflects the views of old rationalism where ontology and epistemology were not given strict philosophical treatments. Berger and Theissen tackle similar problems but, unlike Räsänen, they attempt to limit their conclusions about the

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nineteenth-century history-of-religions school and clearly accepts the semantical view of primitive reference.

<sup>107</sup> If this issue is not seen as a matter concerning the role of metaphysics, scholars end up in fruitless debates over definitions of knowledge and even the nature of scientific research. Matlock has described this well in his critical article on Räsänen's *Beyond*, where he discusses Räsänen's position by comparing it to a debate between Watson and Davies. These scholars had a disagreement concerning the nature of "secular" academic research, especially about the confessional reading of biblical texts. The discussion proves that, as long as "science" is defined solely in terms of positivist epistemology, all we can expect is a blind alley. Matlock concludes that scholars just accuse each other of faults and become "mirror images of one another." Matlock, *Moving Beyond*, 377.

true nature of religion more strictly. It will be the task of other scholars to decide whether they have succeeded in this.

Moreover, there has been a strict debate about the very nature of academic research and its principles. As we noted above Räsänen, when introducing his history-of-religion program, argued that it would represent a more strictly scholarly and scientifically justified approach to the New Testament than all other attempts to investigate biblical theology. According to his convictions people who “work in a broader *academic* context” end up abandoning the primacy of the canon, questioning revelation, privileging social reality, and offering their results not to churches but to the society. The discussions on the role of metaphysics and the philosophical debates over realism studied in this work prove, however, that nominalist materialism is in no position to claim exclusive rights to scientific investigation. To be exact, apart from positivism itself, metaphysical theories outnumber the strictly materialist theories in the West.

As we apply all this to biblical interpretation, and especially to the currents mentioned above, certain theological implications can be pointed out. It is apparent that, during the development of hermeneutics, God has been pushed farther and farther from this world. The crucial factor here, in my estimation, has been Kantian phenomenology that has turned God into a mere principle. It is a small step from here to proceed to the claim that God is completely absent. In this respect, death-of-God theology can be seen as an essentially Kantian development. There have been opposing voices, like Bultmann’s, but these have not fared well in the struggle.

Bultmann is dependent on different kinds of premises. He appears to have been affected by Wolffian rationalism, Troeltsch’s historicism, Kantian phenomenology, Hegelian ontology and Heideggerian existentialism. The outcome of all this has always been confusing. The principles of biblical theology are far from clear: Bultmann’s demythologized Jesus inspires a gnostic Paul, but neither of these are able to provide any basis for the doctrines of the emerging church. In fact, in Bultmann’s theory, there are no doctrines at all. All the early ecclesia has is a collection of irrelevant myths that refer to no reality whatsoever apart from human anthropology. Hence, the church today has no dogma, no proper liturgy, no Holy Communion, and no hope in the eschaton.

As we have claimed, Räsänen has attempted to solve the problems that Bultmann’s conclusions had created. As the comparison presented above shows, he has maintained the same point of departure and many of the historical and epistemological principles Bultmann had adopted. He demythologizes and, like Bultmann, believes that tradition is adapted

and created anew in new contexts. And in the middle of all this, given the three alternatives above, he has attempted to formulate a fourth theory of hermeneutics and a fourth interpretation of religion. In the footsteps of Buri and with the support of Wrede, he has proceeded in the direction of an atheist, materialist interpretation. For Räsänen, God has no epistemological significance in hermeneutics.

For Räsänen, religion is a cultural phenomenon. The best one can say about it is that, in each generation, a religion or community expresses its essential beliefs by creating a symbolic world. In the Weberian interpretation religion is a human construct. All the descriptions of this symbolic world, for Räsänen, are fictitious. The symbolic world, for him, represents “a huge panorama of ‘natural’ religion,” as he stated as a young scholar in the *Authority*. In the present situation it must be subjected to *Sachkritik*, and its doctrinal content must be rejected. This results in a counter-theology that, necessarily, is normative—as Räsänen himself has admitted.

For Räsänen, there is no true description of the human condition in the Bible. In reality, there is no such thing as sin. This is why there cannot be redemption (it would have no relevance) and, likewise, no authoritative, revelatory soteriology. This, of course, is in line with his idea of the disillusionment of eschatology: there will never be divine judgment. History will go on as it does in terms of human action. Furthermore, his materialist realism implies that there is no proper Christology that could explain Jesus’ true nature. Instead, the real historical Jesus must have been just a Galilean man who has explained and interpreted his religious experiences in terms of apocalyptic Jewish theology and eschatology. This, of course, is the project Reimarus conducted in his time. He was determined to show that there was no divine revelation in the Bible. It is not the Word of God, an expression that Räsänen too uses in some of his negations. There is neither inspiration nor divine authority. In this sense, for Räsänen, the Bible must be read like any other piece of literature—like the Quran.

Consistent with his principles, Räsänen, in his hermeneutics, often makes claims for freedom of thought. This is what he has aimed at all his career. Nevertheless, his interpretation theory has turned out to be deterministic. In sacralized culturalism, culture finally gets the dominating role. In Räsänen’s view, culture necessarily directs the appropriation of previous thought and the reformation of religion. Ideas are believed to develop in chains, and each new link is the product of a new context. There is no longer room for independent theology. This is full-grown culturalism. In these chains of interpretation culture dictates the content of religion.

## CHAPTER TEN

### CONCLUSION: CHAINS OF INTERPRETATION

Professor emeritus Heikki Räisänen has been an influential figure and enthusiastic debator throughout his career both in Finland and the international field. As regards hermeneutics, his programmatic book *Beyond New Testament Theology* presents new visions in New Testament studies. Räisänen challenges traditional ways to understand New Testament theology and proposes a renewed Wredean history-of-religion approach to the investigation of early Christian thought world. The aim of the present study has been to explain how Räisänen's interpretation theory developed. To achieve this goal a wide exploration of the field of New Testament criticism from several different angles has been necessary.

The attempt to understand Räisänen's hermeneutical work, thus, has not been merely a project of investigating Räisänen's own writings. Instead, we have chosen the alternative to place Räisänen in context. His ideas have been studied in relation to Reimarus, Bultmann, Berger, and Theissen, to name a few examples, and to early Quran criticism, German historicism, materialist sociology, and poststructuralist theory. One probably could not expect that a spectrum this wide could help us understand one and the same hermeneutical theory—but it can. In an individual and somewhat original way Räisänen's understanding of the nature of religion affects his theory throughout his life. Therefore, the treatment of all these phases has been necessary in order to understand the climax of his interpretation theory, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*. The analysis made in this study has confirmed many of the critical assessments presented before for instance by Balla, Penner, Stichele, van Spanje, and Adam. Nevertheless, the present approach has also had the advantage of bringing some entirely new aspects to the investigation of the development of Western hermeneutics, and especially the sociological current in New Testament theology.

Räisänen, in his hermeneutics, is indebted first and foremost to Reimarus for his transformative world view—the same issue that inspired the entire genesis of historical-critical study of the Bible. Like many of his predecessors, Räisänen is convinced that the new naturalist world view is true. For him, the world and the human understanding of the

world, as well as history, has changed irreversibly. Even though Räsänen writes more than a hundred years after the main naturalist biblical scholars in Lutheran Germany, he belongs to the first scholars to introduce this hermeneutical approach to Finnish scholarship. Therefore, in many respects, it has been easy for him to identify himself with the first great protagonists of historical-critical investigation of the New Testament. And as we have seen, he often feels that he has had to fight his way through the conservative and dogmatic Lutheran tradition in Finland in order to show that there is no other “valid” reading of the Bible than the historical-critical one.

This point of departure is probably why Räsänen, throughout his career, has investigated and discussed all the main hermeneutical patterns that have emerged in Europe during the regime of the historical-critical method. He even mentions the Reimarian rationalist method that first focused on the supernatural nature of Biblical texts. Räsänen accepts the basic criticism that grows from the new naturalist world view and, as we have noted, applies Reimarian principles of investigation in a similar way to the investigation of both the Bible and the Quran.

Räsänen’s interest in Quran studies is the clearest parallel between them. According to this study, we cannot say that Räsänen learns from Reimarus directly. His treatment of the Quran does not appear to follow the examples Reimarus provides. Nor does he quote Reimarus on this issue—as he probably would have done had he learned from him as much as he learned from Wrede. In spite of this, the analogy is relevant. Räsänen treats the Quran and the Bible, and their relationship, just as Reimarus did. He accepts Reimarian principles and holds them in high esteem in his own writings. He also applies rationalist criteria when comparing the Quran and the Bible, in order to show that neither of these books can claim to be divine revelation. Contradictions and errors prove that the Bible cannot be the inerrant word of God. How is it possible that Räsänen so carefully uses the criteria found in Reimarus’ early works? The final conclusion in the present study is that such ideas have been common knowledge throughout the historical-critical period. When Räsänen as a young scholar set out to write on the Quran, it was natural for him to end up with the very same methods and analyses Reimarus had once presented.

What is even more interesting is that Räsänen, in his hermeneutics, builds directly on the ideas garnered from the sphere of Quran studies. As he also himself states in certain later articles, the main structure of his hermeneutical innovation can be read already in the epilogue of his

*Das koranische Jesusbild* (1971). According to our analysis, however, his 1972 study *The Idea of Divine Hardening* appears to be the actual work where the hermeneutical theory of the chain of interpretation comes into play. This has turned out to be the essential text where Räsänen brings the concept of social experience to the fore and puts it in the core of his theory. The theory itself with the hermeneutical triad is published the very same year in his programmatic article *Authority*.

The theological—or philosophy-of-religion—issue in Räsänen's early works is predestination. In his Quran studies he is interested in the problem of theodicy and different ways of dealing with it. This was also one of Weber's main subjects in his sociology of religion. In the New Testament, the most famous passage treating this question is Romans 9–11, and it becomes crucial also for Räsänen. In fact, over the years he continually discusses it in several articles and finally even in the *Rise*. Räsänen's main claim in this issue is that Paul here relies on double predestination. He states that, for Paul, it is the only way to justify divine authority when explaining the status of Israel: He hardens whomever He wills. This is why Räsänen's main argument in his hermeneutical theory of the chain of interpretation, and the one that proves Paul's unavoidable inconsistency, concerns double predestination—the view that Paul then cannot hold when speaking of God's mercy. This result may sound somewhat surprising since, in his writings, Räsänen has treated so many other issues when discussing hermeneutics.

In the hermeneutical application, however, Räsänen does not completely follow his continental predecessors. Neither does he accept the hermeneutical solution suggested by Deism. Instead, he is certain that Strauss and his colleagues were right in criticizing the coarse explanatory move of the Deists. Strauss' own Hegelian idealism was one of the solutions to the same historical problem, of course, attempting to separate history from religious ideas. Räsänen may think that it was an improvement for early rationalist hermeneutics but ultimately he himself could not accept Strauss' hermeneutical theory either. Räsänen could not bear the idea that there would be a true *Begriff* behind the *Vorstellungen* of this religious world. Instead, he gave weight to human invention.

In Germany, Neo-Kantian moralism gradually surpassed Straussian liberalism and provided a completely new interpretation of the message of Christian faith. If the original problem was in the distorted history and supernatural world view of the writers of biblical texts, then the *rationale* of Christian faith should be found in the relevance of the actual message—that being the ethical conduct of life. Marburger Neo-Kantians



believed that religious experience should be separated from the great principles of universal religion. As Kant suggested, God is now seen as the justification for a priori ethics, and the Christian ethos becomes identified with the categorical imperative. For some reason, Räsänen never fully accepts this solution. The problem is probably in the Neo-Kantian emphasis on the concept of God. In the area of ethics, the divinely justified ethical norm now becomes the *Begriff* that needs no other justification. For Räsänen, biblical ethics is no longer a standard that should be granted divine authority. Therefore, he moves on.

Rudolf Bultmann, the versatile scholar with his history-of-religion school background, *Entmythologisierung*, and the form-critical theory, is indisputably the most influential scholar on Räsänen's thinking. In many respects, Räsänen accepts most of his premises and even follows many of his conclusions. In the area of hermeneutics, however, Räsänen cannot accept existentialism. Bultmann appears to return to irrational metaphysics, and this is something Räsänen cannot do.

In a sense one could say that Räsänen adopts and exploits most of his famous predecessor's premises but he wishes to follow the train of thought through to the bitter end. The Bultmannian explanation of a gospel tradition that changed in new contexts (*Sitz im Leben*) already provided a pattern for the chain of interpretation, not to mention his reluctance to accept any theological proposition constructed in a particular historical situation as valid. Räsänen's hermeneutics can be understood as an attempt to show what really follows if one accepts the true results of the changed world view. Materialism leaves no room for metaphysical contemplation. The naturalist view of history does not allow any a priori religious principles. Religion must be investigated as a human invention and part of human history. Biblical hermeneutics, Räsänen states, must follow this ideal. Therefore, he has suggested *Entkerygmatisierung* in the Bultmannian tradition. Social treatment of the gospel material is a good start but it is not yet the right conclusion. Räsänen proclaims that the right way to understand the entire Christian faith is to read it in terms of sociology.

This is how Räsänen's hermeneutical theory turns out to be sociological from the very start. Since he was interested in the science of religion in the beginning of his career, when writing on the Quran, he was well informed in Weberian methodology of the sociology of religion because that was one of the essential methods used in that field in the 1970s. When learning later that Berger had developed the Weberian approach, Räsänen got involved with the new theory of the sociology of knowledge. This is where Räsänen finally found confirmation for the idea that religion

is part of culture and culture is part of religion. For Berger, like for Weber, religion was a social construction and symbolic world that must be both understood and treated as a human construction. This is very much the hermeneutical pattern Räsänen himself had developed already in his early writings. What unites these scholars is their turn “from authority to experience.”

The new view also helped Räsänen to solve the problems he had had with Wrede. Even though Räsänen clearly wanted to promote Wrede’s history-of-religion project in a new context, he could not accept many of Wrede’s principles. The problem of the canon, for instance, has turned out to be secondary in Räsänen’s work. He does of course investigate other ancient writings but his main arguments are based on biblical material. He has also himself admitted that he could have conducted a thematic investigation, going explicitly against Wrede’s ideals.

Räsänen’s reason for abandoning the primacy of canon must obviously be found elsewhere. It helps him solve the problem concerning the *authority* of Scripture, the question that occupied him from the start of his career. As we have seen, Räsänen actually admits that an ecclesial New Testament theology could be written. The canonical texts as they stand somehow make it possible, probably on the narrative level if nothing else. This, however, is not an option for Räsänen because his life-long historical-critical work prevents him from accepting a solution that he sees as a religious decision. Hence the history-of-religion approach. For Räsänen the choice is clear: either one chooses the historical-critical reality or one adopts a religious ecclesial alternative (the worst example of which is orthodoxy).

This move explains further why Räsänen does not accept the Wredean separation of religion and theology. Berger’s Weberian sociology of religion provided a practical solution to this issue: the symbolic world could be treated as an integral part of religion itself. For Berger, religion is a mental structure. A mental structure can still be seen as a rather stable construction, though. Once more Räsänen needed to mould the theory he kept in discussion with. As Berger still emphasizes the importance of experience, and even that of a historical core experience, Räsänen turns the logic of inference around. For him, tradition comes first. Experience is not precisely “religious” experience but it, too, must be interpreted in terms of the naturalist world view. For Räsänen, experience is a completely human and social experience in a religious context. Therefore, he believes that social experience makes people create new interpretations that change tradition.

experience-tradition-reflection (Berger)  
 tradition-experience-interpretation (Räisänen)

By emphasizing crises as the main form of experience that changes Christian tradition Räisänen rejects metaphysics in his hermeneutical theory. This is approximately the same reason for Räisänen's rejection of Theissen's semiotical hermeneutics. He does say that they have a common point of departure but, in the end, Theissen fails to draw the immanent conclusions that must be drawn should one want to create a consistent sociological theory. These examples prove that Räisänen has been quite independent when constructing his theory, and he is critical even of those theories from which he learns.

Poststructuralism, then, could have been the closest frame of reference for what Western philosophy has produced during the decades after the Second World War. Considering the details of Räisänen's hermeneutics, there are several points of contact. Poststructuralism sees the development of culture as a tapestry that gradually grows in a particular tradition. For these philosophers culture is a woven fabric where everything is connected with tradition, but where colors change constantly. It is a flow that never ends. This is almost identical to the idea that Räisänen has promoted for his entire career. These views are analogical because Räisänen, too, believes that religion forms a never-ending chain of interpretation.

There has been a long development of "immanent" hermeneutics in the West starting from Reimarus' rationalist dichotomies and extending to Bultmann's extreme dualism and other sociological post-Bultmannian theories. As incredulity towards metaphysics grew among successive hermeneutical theories, French poststructuralism gradually gave birth to apophatic a-theologies proclaiming the death of God (Taylor). Divine presence was said to be experienced only in God's absence. There may be some metaphysics left in Cupitt's negative theology but, overall, this current in scholarship has ended up with a final contradiction: not only do theological propositions lack meaning—just as Bultmann said—but religious experience lacks content.

On the surface, this apophatic tradition seems to resemble Räisänen's ontological point of departure quite closely. This, however, must not prevent one from paying attention to the fact that the essential difference between Räisänen and the poststructuralist movement concerns epistemology. For the poststructuralists, all knowledge is in motion. Even our understanding of this world, the "real" world as well as history, keeps changing. All these features belong to the woven fabric producing a

discursive understanding of reality or, as Berger puts it, a social construction of reality. This is where Räsänen remains a rationalist. He is convinced that scientific knowledge, even though dependent on premises and paradigms, is able to achieve considerably certain, true knowledge of history as it was. This is no surprise, though, if one recalls that Berger had difficulties in reconciling Weberian sociology with phenomenological epistemology. Therefore, even though some of Räsänen's conclusions may resemble those of the poststructuralist death-of-God authors, his argumentation never goes along the same exact lines. They address the same problem, but they provide different answers to it.

Why then does Räsänen's conception of religious language resemble the view that the poststructuralists have supported? The analysis has shown that Räsänen, as a rationalist who has adopted positivism's views about semantics, still believes in the theory of primitive reference. He holds that the meaning of a word is its object. According to the reductionist view of the history-of-religions school, religious language does not have a real object and this is why religious expressions about God and divine things do not have referential meaning. They become mere stories that have a discursive meaning. Even though this may superficially resemble the poststructuralist view they have almost nothing in common. Räsänen does not reject the transcendental signified as such, as Derrida did. Instead, he is very convinced that scientific language and even everyday human language is able to reach the object. For Räsänen, categories are real.

Weberian sociology of knowledge, thus, can be held to be the most important source of inspiration for Räsänen's hermeneutical theory. Correcting the faults of many of his predecessors, as he believes, Räsänen wishes to create a completely immanent sociological interpretation of the New Testament. Religion is a human construction, as several other scholars also admit, but as such it must be explained and interpreted merely as a panorama of human invention. There are no true doctrines and no phase of religious imagination can be granted an absolute status in Christian tradition. There is no priority between different views and, therefore, there has never been any objective standard according to which the canon of the New Testament could or should have been collected. There is but an early Christian religion with all the different expressions dealing with different religious phenomena.

The main result of the present analysis of Räsänen's sociological hermeneutics with its chain of interpretation, thus, concerns his *sacralized culturalism*. Culturalism means the idea that individuals are determined by their culture. In the case of the Weberian definition this means that

religion as a mental structure is one of the factors that constitute human identity and the human interpretation of reality. In Räsänen's version, sacralized culturalism means that society and religion have a reciprocal relationship: the society itself creates its symbolic world, and religion—as this kind of system—affects individual people. The main issue here is that, in sacralized culturalism, all new interpretations the society produces are seen as *religious* interpretations despite the fact that new ideas question the doctrines of traditional religions. Furthermore, this results in a Kantian distinction between historical religion and universal religion. For Räsänen, the contemporary revision is the only valid form of religion today.

It is easy to understand how such a Weberian current in sociology has turned out to be useful for Räsänen, because it has helped him sort out how cultural changes can be treated also as religious changes. If Christianity's symbolic world or worlds are to be understood as social constructions, all new social constructions can be expected to change previous views. Therefore, Räsänen's history-of-religion approach does not precisely concern religion or doctrines—or even theological themes if we use his terminology. Instead, it concerns any cultural change in the community. The history of theology is identical with the history of ideas. In this respect the Weberian scheme no doubt supports Räsänen's idea of a chain of interpretation. Berger, however, created a real Gordian knot when he attempted to solve the tension between the sociological reduction and Christian metaphysics by focusing on “original experience.” For Räsänen, this contradiction is irreconcilable, and no return to metaphysics can be allowed. He comes with a sword and proclaims: “So I choose society.”

The analysis has shown, however, that there is a discrepancy between Wrede and Weber in Räsänen's hermeneutics. Räsänen's Wredean history of religion recommends that one should abandon New Testament theology and focus on independent groups and their religious identity. This should result in a synchronic explanation. In order to reveal the “original” diversity of early Christian teaching one should investigate differing expressions of religious experience—just as Räsänen in his *Beyond* claimed. Räsänen's Weberian purpose, however, makes him work diachronically. As he is destined to work on cultural evolution and the changes that mould the Christian symbolic world—which now is more or less a single unit—he is forced to return to New Testament theology and investigate the alleged development of particular theological themes. Sociology of knowledge takes over, and Räsänen starts to investigate the

development of theology by detecting disagreement, power struggles, and violent appropriation of previous views.

One poststructuralist principle remains in Räsänen's theory, though. As his sociological interpretation has produced a pan-religious view concerning the spectrum of religious phenomena, all attempts to limit that multiplicity and diversity must be considered violent attacks on human freedom. Räsänen has a moralist fervor similar to that of the poststructuralists in their defense of particular discourses—especially the oppressed discourses. Orthodoxy, for Räsänen, represents the most despicable attitude that refuses to acknowledge the true nature of religion and wants to restrict the freedom of thought through oppressive patterns. This is why, in Räsänen's view, historical-critical investigation is—and can be—opposed only by conservative fundamentalism. There is no third alternative—or at least there was not one until postmodern feminism and postcolonial interpretations arose and challenged the “modern” rationalist historical-critical movement in theology.

As Räsänen attempts to reject the entire concept of New Testament theology, clearly he must have an explanation for the very idea of *dogma*. Based on Räsänen's general hermeneutical theory, dogma must be nothing more than a product of pure imagination, a mental picture. Therefore, dogma for Räsänen means quite the same as for Harnack who, in his famous lectures called *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Essence of Christianity), explained the emergence of dogmas as a degenerative process. Harnack stated that the original religious enthusiasm, seen in early Christianity, gradually faded away while tradition was petrified into doctrinal statements. Räsänen, too, assumes that the original diversity of Christian experience was replaced by particular doctrines that were used as weapons in the violent power struggles of the early church.

This is the hermeneutical theory according to which *The Rise of Christian Beliefs* has been written. Due to his theory Räsänen is destined to study theology instead of religion. As the table of contents shows, he chooses to discuss sin, soteriology, Christology, pneumatology, Israel, and idolatry—every subject neatly in a chapter of its own. There is another side to this coin, however. Simultaneously, Räsänen treats the distinctive issues in terms of the sociology of religion. Christian dogmatics—if we may call the *loci* he uses by a traditional term—must now be explained in terms of the chain of interpretation. Each theme apparently is believed to form a set of symbols in the symbolic world. They are human constructs that develop over the course of history. Paradoxically, thus, *dogmas* always exist only in the past. They are historical facts as tradition itself is investigated and

interpreted. But after the reassessment they become parts of the ever-changing culture: transient symbols that belong merely to a particular historical context.

Räisänen evidently faces the same problem as Bultmann before him. Bultmann believed that religious experience, as *Erlebnis* can never be expressed in propositions. When it is, it happens to reflect just the cultural ideology of the writer—and thus leads the religious community astray. But since Räisänen is not an existentialist, he can never rely on *kerygma* as a divine address to people. All he has is a constant flow of insignificant and useless words, transient expressions that at best may have aesthetic value in the community. Thanks to his sociological theory, Räisänen is not very consistent when using categories like soteriology and Christology because, according to his theory, such categories can never have true content and, if this is right, never actually even be constructed.

The main purpose of the *Rise* is to investigate each theme on its own and to provide a description of the chain of interpretation that finally produced the doctrinal system of Christianity. Räisänen remains surprisingly unclear, though. As some of his commentators have noticed, his book does not appear to be as consistent and disciplined as the theory itself states. Instead, Räisänen presents some philosophy of religion speculations about eschatology, collects almost trivial views on the human condition, and remains remarkably ambivalent when facing recent studies on Christology. There is a danger that the great task the author has set for himself in the *Beyond* is just a collection of standard historical-critical results from the twentieth century. Applying a Wredean reading to the entirety of early Christianity did not live up to its expectations. Räisänen can naturally prove diversity as he discusses certain Jewish (non-Christian) writings, as well as some second-century writings, but it is not easy to prove that these would really belong to the same chain of interpretation. The chains are broken already in Räisänen's own book.

Räisänen's contribution is clearest in his treatment of orthodoxy—a theme that no doubt fits his desire to replace New Testament theology with a history-of-religion reading. This particular chapter in his book no longer investigates individual biblical passages but, instead, remains completely in the field of the philosophy of religion. This is where Räisänen's hermeneutical theory has felt at home from the very start. His Wolfenbüttelian turn has aimed at the deconstruction of the Christian *Systema*, the doctrinal system that the church has believed emerges from the canonical texts themselves.



As a hermeneutic, Räsänen's program has belonged to the field of sociology of religion for decades, and it has several philosophy of religion features. He joins the humanist movement that opposes Christian tradition and the Christian interpretation of human life. The old view, according to Räsänen, belongs to the mythical period. According to his Weberian metanarrative, the contemporary world must interpret human existence in another light completely. All religious violence based on oppressive views of the human race such as *massa perditionis*, a corrupt flesh awaiting divine judgment, must now be abandoned. If not in any other respect, Nietzsche was right in stating that the biblical description of the human condition is false.

The main contribution Räsänen has provided for the scholarly community is thus in showing what logical conclusions one should inevitably draw should scholars strictly follow the premises of the historical-critical investigation and form a hermeneutical theory on that basis. The greatest problem for biblical hermeneutics for centuries now has been the difficulty of maintaining metaphysics when adopting a historicist theory and, in this context, still provide a plausible hermeneutical system that would be useful for theology. Räsänen has contributed to this discussion by falsification. His work has challenged both the Neo-Kantian cultural Protestantism and Bultmannian existentialism by claiming that these hermeneutical efforts have given in to the transcendental argument even though the theory itself does not seem to leave room for it. For some reason, however, Räsänen has not been able to provide any constructive alternative to these. Instead, he has moved in a materialist direction and questioned metaphysics altogether.

Furthermore, these examples emphasize also the main result of the present study. As regards the signification process and construction of meaning, they are weighted towards ontology (and respectively, epistemology), not theories concerning human behavior. In the sphere of philosophy this is self-evident but it needs to be taken into account also here. Hermeneutical theory changes as the scholar's ontological view changes: from rationalist materialism to Hegelian dualism to Kantian phenomenology, etc. Explanation and interpretation of the New Testament's message is dependent, for instance, on one's view concerning the structure of reality or the nature of religion in general.

The scholarly community has usually been open to different ontological premises and supported an open interaction and discussion between different views. Such transparency in scientific investigation, however, has

been compromised by the Comtean/Weberian metanarrative according to which metaphysical explanations of religion, in principle, are pre-critical and destined to vanish. Räisänen's hermeneutical theory of the chain of interpretation belongs to this current. As a positivist theory it marks the decline of historical-critical hermeneutics in the situation where post-liberal views are gradually taking over. The linguistic shift in New Testament scholarship has, in the new century, opened anew the potential of interaction in the scholarly community. Today, metaphysical theories are part of the discussion, not merely rejected mythical tales from the past. In the new situation it remains to be seen how well such a Weberian twentieth-century hermeneutics can hold out.

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